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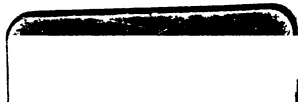
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A

BRIDE FROM THE RHINELAND.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

"Oh, bitterer far than all,
It was to know that love can fade and die."
"Hark—for the ages call,
The love of God lasts through all eternity,
And conquers all."



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A BRIDE FROM THE RHINELAND.

CHAPTER I.

WHEN Verina recovered, she seemed to acquiesce more willingly in Sir Arthur's neglect and her own isolation. At least she no longer remonstrated with him; and she no longer continued her vain endeavours to be still received as one of the family circle, or her as vain offers to join the others in their occupations or amusements. She took long walks and rides alone. The wild desolate unbounded chalk downs were her favourite resort. A steep ascent of a mile leads from Mordaunt

Hall to the summit of the range of hills, where, far as eye can see, extend on every side the wild uncultivated downs. Bleak is this wild country, with restless winds for ever whistling through its thin grasses—never a tree is to be seen, and untenanted is it by any human beings, save shepherds guarding vast flocks of sheep, or by a solitary trainer galloping a fleet racer far away on the horizon. Here the lonely plovers cry their melancholy calls; and here such cloud scenes as are seldom beheld in the lower lands gather of an evening in the west in wondrous phantasmagoria. The very wildness and desolation of these downs seemed to calm Verina's troubled spirit; and a swift canter over the thin turf, with the rough winds dashing round her, would bring a colour to her cheek and an exhilaration to her mood as nothing else did now.

On the northern borders of the downs

the land falls abruptly away into the "vale of the White Horse." One of Verina's favourite rides was in this direction, to a point from whence she could look down and over the broad pleasant vale, through which in the far distance the Thames rolls its silver length past green meadows and stately cities—past, too, the dense woods above which rise the ivy-grown chimneys of Cumnor Place, to which old Place there clings a melancholy fame, for the sake of the tragic fate met by its one-time mistress—gentle Amy Robsart.

Another of Verina's favourite points was a spot that commanded a wide view towards the south. This was a chosen resort, for the sake of the line of distant light which was sometimes visible when the sun shone brightly. That silvery line was the English Channel. Beyond it lay Germany, and merely to look across at that line of light, seemed to bring her nearer to

her home. Verina liked to feel this nearness, for often now she yearned for a sight of the old and familiar things.

She had heard no tidings from Rüdtsheim since she had left. She had written once to her father, but she had received no answer; nor did she expect one, for his last words to her had been: "The sooner we can forget one another the better; we must both strive to do so, therefore do not write to me." In the first year of her marriage it had been easy for Verina to obey this injunction. Of late all things were altered. Gretchen was too little of a scholar to make good the Herr's omissions in this respect.

One stormy-looking afternoon, Verina ordered her horse in spite of the dark and threatening clouds; for she felt as if nothing but a swift canter could rouse her from the mournful reveries which haunted her. Sir Arthur and Lydia were in the hall as

Verina passed through. Sir Arthur was turning from the front door, and addressing his sister he said :

“ It will not do for our ride, there is a thunderstorm coming. Not that I care for that, but you would be wet through and through, which would be very grievous !” He spake quite tenderly.

“ Well, then,” said Lydia, in her clear triumphant voice, “ if you will not let me ride, you will have to finish our game of billiards.”

Lydia liked nothing better than displaying her brother’s tenderness for her before his young pale wife.

“ Just as you please,” he replied, with that pleasant smile which used once to meet Verina’s lightest word. Now, as she passed, he looked at her with more indifference than he would have looked at the humblest servant in his house. He did not notice her in any way, did not offer to

assist her to mount ; did not remonstrate with *her* about the thunderstorm being braved by *her*. That was a matter of indifference to him.

"Surely," thought Verina bitterly, "surely it must be a dream that I am his wife ; it must be Lydia who is so really."

That morning he had spoken even unusually indifferent words to her, and it was with a heavier heart than ever that Verina rode on towards the downs. As she went, she recalled again and again the pleasant smile and answer that were ready now only for Lydia ; and as her dark eyes glanced purposelessly up at the tall trees in the hedgerows, there was a look in those eyes which said they found life very weary. They did not seem to be heeding any outward things, but only, like two grave sentinels, to be keeping all-absorbing watch over the dreary grief within.

A ploughboy paused his team for a mo-

ment that he might look at "my lady," and then went on his way through the rich red furrows, whistling cheerily, and, as he whistled, he thought how pleasant it must be to be mistress of Mordaunt Hall, and ride such a pretty horse whenever you liked. Little did the red-cheeked, light-hearted boy imagine with what a sudden envy "my lady" listened to his blithe whistle, as she rode so slowly by.

On and on rode Verina over the bleak, bare uplands, till she came to her favourite spot. Here, on a little mound, grew one solitary storm-bent larch. Straight up the steep ascent Verina put her horse, and then drew rein beneath the withered tree, and gazed over hill and plain far away to the south—yes, there faintly glimmered the far off Channel, and there, beyond that line of silvery light, lay Germany.

Long Verina gazed. Once more she stood in a low, bright room, and looked out

upon the broad Rhine. She could see the rafts, and the steamers, and the boats float by ; could see the blue mountains beyond, and the cheerful sunshine that was streaming over all ; could hear the very buzz of the cockchafers, and the rustling of the vine leaves round the open casement. Her eyes—they knew so well the very corner—sought the old portfolio of sketches, for there beside it stood her unfinished St. Stephen. And then she recalled the vivid delight, the eagerness, the triumph with which she had worked at it—recalled, too, the golden atmosphere of dreamy, happy fancies—the impossible futures that had floated round her whilst she worked. A sad smile came to her lips at that vision of glad, unclouded, eager girlhood—her former self !

Meanwhile the clouds gathered overhead in dense black masses, and one or two large drops fell ominously.

Verina quitted her station, but far from dreading the storm, she raised her face to meet the cool, fresh raindrops, and rode quickly on. In heavier and heavier gusts came the rain; and the wind rose and swept wildly over the downs, driving the clouds swiftly before it, in jet black, towering masses. And in the distance long peals of thunder began to roll. Presently a flash of lightning made Verina's horse plunge violently. A solitary raven was flying hurriedly along against the darkening sky. He seemed the only other living thing on the desolate downs; and as he went he croaked again and again with his wild and dismal cry, as though he dreaded the coming storm. The elements did, indeed, appear preparing for a giant battle. But the gloom and the wild tumult around her, suited well with Verina's feverish mood; the stormy winds seemed to blow the fever from her cheek; and as her horse

plunged again and again at the lightning flashing round him, Verina could have clapped her hands with delight, for like a very spirit of the storm did she enter into the excitement of the scene.

At length the storm began to be quenched by the heavy rain that fell, the peals of thunder grew fainter and fainter—the lightning flashes few and far between. Whilst the storm raged, Verina had been too engrossed in its magnificence to consider where she went. She now became suddenly aware that she had quitted the faintly-worn pathway ; and that not one landmark familiar to her was to be seen. In vain she looked around for a well-known white stone, fernbrake, or thornbush ; far or near there was nothing to be seen, but one vast track of barren down, unbroken by stone, or bush, or fern. In vain Verina retraced her steps ; or rode by turns towards each quarter of the compass—no

pathway, no familiar object could she find. Not even a shepherd was to be seen, to whom she might apply. Apparently she was quite alone—even the raven had vanished. She was obliged to confess to herself that she had hopelessly lost her way.

She felt rather uneasy at this discovery, for she knew that people had lost themselves for days on these desolate uplands, and already she was shivering with the wet and cold. Therefore it was a relief to her when she suddenly heard a shrill whistle, and saw a figure emerging from the curtain of grey mist which shrouded the distance.

Through the drifting rain and the occasional lightning, this figure walked on with the careless ease of perfect enjoyment. It seemed, indeed, to Verina, that the colder and denser were the gushes of rain, the more cheery was the light-hearted whistle. As Verina rode nearer, she discovered that this contented pedestrian was a tall, bright-

looking boy, of, apparently, about sixteen. The grey shepherd's plaid which he wore Scotch fashion over his right arm, looked completely soaked, and so did his curly dark hair, but a merrier face Verina had never seen. A wiry-haired frightful terrier trotted contentedly on before him, seeming to heed the storm as little as did his master.

Verina rode up to him.

"Can you tell me," she asked, "in which direction lies Mordaunt Hall?"

The boy looked up at her and thought that the graceful lady, with her strayed tresses floating round her in long golden curls, and with her deep blue eyes, looked very like a spirit as she bent down towards him from her tall, grey horse.

He answered promptly :

"Mordaunt Hall lies miles behind you. You have been riding straight away from it ever since I first caught sight of you."

Verina looked in dismay at her dripping habit and cold hands. That she had still so far to go was not pleasant tidings.

"I am afraid you are wet through, Lady Mordaunt," continued the boy.

"Do you know me?" she asked, with a little smile of surprise.

"I should think I ought by this time."

"But I have never seen you before."

"Pardon me, Lady Mordaunt, you have *seen* me frequently, though I dare say you have never *noticed* me. I and my brethren sit opposite the Mordaunt pew in church; and when Mr. Norris is, as is too frequently the case, remarkably dull, how can I employ my time better than in looking at my neighbours? I have had occasional qualms about the doubtful civility of staring at you so perseveringly; but as it seems that you have never found me out, it has, after all, been a very innocent amusement. But to return from this

digression, I beg you will let me take you home to my sister to get dry and warm before you set out on your long ride home. We are close to the house."

The boy would take no refusal, and was so friendly, so attractive in his bright kindliness, that Verina was not very unwilling to consent. Accordingly she yielded herself to his guidance. A sudden gush of ice-cold wind and rain assaulted her and her companion. Verina bent her head to escape its blinding force, but the boy and his dog walked on as unconcernedly as ever.

"You and your dog seem to enjoy this weather," she said, rather enviously.

"Oh," he answered, "Timothy and I are remarkable in our family for the philosophy with which we take things. We are often heard to say, 'What can't be cured, must be endured.'" Timothy trotted on quite unmoved by his master's extraordinary

allegation concerning him. "Accordingly as we can't stop the rain, why, we e'en endure it."

And for no particular reason the boy burst out into the merriest laugh. The laughter was catching, and Verina, too, laughed as she had not laughed for many a day.

"I wonder if you and Timothy would be equally philosophical if your hands were as cold as mine."

The jest-loving boy changed at once into the most tender of protectors.

"Your hands cold!" he cried, quite distressed. "What shall we do?—at any rate drop the reins and let me lead your horse; nothing makes hands so cold as holding reins."

But Verina only declared, with a smile, that she, too, would try and be philosophical; and asked if they were still far from his home.

"No, we are close to it."

Remarking the incredulous gaze Verina cast over the wide, unbroken downs, he went on :

"Do you see that great white stone yonder ? Do you suppose that you could ride to it from here, straight as the crow flies ? Yes, you say ; well, all I know is, that you would have to clatter over the roof of the Grange. It lies in a hollow, to the brink of which we shall presently come."

"The Grange," repeated Verina thoughtfully.

The boy laughed.

"Perhaps I ought to have told you sooner where I was taking you. Yes, Lady Mordaunt, I am an enemy — or rather, Sir Arthur Mordaunt is my brother's enemy. They had a grand dispute last election ; but if you will overlook this little circumstance, I can promise you the warmest welcome. The feud will but lend a romantic zest to our friendship."

"I shall be only too grateful for a shelter and a rest," said Verina. "I know nothing of Sir Arthur's politics; but I still cannot guess who you are—will you tell me?"

"Certainly. With great pleasure will I begin a new edition of the famous Norval!

"My name is Rollo Harrington,
On these wide plains——"

Alas, my simile here comes at once to an end, for, thank goodness, I *don't* keep sheep 'on these wide plains!'—a pretty time the poor beasties would lead with only me and Tim to look after them. I should never do for a meditative shepherd," and Rollo hereupon burst out singing,

"Gentle shepherd, tell me why—"

and as abruptly stopped.

"Lady Mordaunt, I beg your pardon.

I am afraid you must think me the most extraordinary being you ever came across. I dare say you are not accustomed to seeing people crazy with happiness."

"I wish I was ; it is a very pleasant sight."

The boy's buoyant overflowing light-heartedness was indeed wonderfully refreshing to Verina's sad heart. It was like a handful of freshest, dewiest, brightest spring flowers.

"What has happened to make you thus crazy ?" she went on.

"Nothing in particular. You might as well ask that lark up there what is making him so entrancingly jolly. I have no doubt that he would reply, even as I do, that he considers it the natural state of things ; and that he has never been able to discover why every one is not the same."

"You are indeed very philosophical," said Verina, with rather a sad smile.

The boy's laugh rang merrily out again. "What a hero I am making of myself, and, after all, the reason I am happy is, that I have not got a care, nor a trouble, nor a want in all the wide world. I dare say if I had that I should be twenty times more impatient than anybody else. Here we are at last."

As he spoke they reached the brink of a deep valley, down the side of which a path led to the long, low, creeper-covered Grange. It was not very large, nor was the garden round it very extensive; but the garden was bright with carefully-tended flowers, and about the house itself there was an indescribable air of home-life and tranquillity. When Verina looked at Rollo's home she felt she could understand his light-heartedness. She felt sure that it was a most genial, kindly home.

Rollo carefully assisted her to dismount, and then led the way to his "sister Margaret's" room. As he did so he said quickly :

" You know Margaret is blind, don't you ?"

Before Verina could reply, he had darted into the room, and a lady's pleasant voice exclaimed :

" My dear Rollo, have you really been out in all this storm ? Pray go and change your things."

" Never mind me, sister—a shower-bath does me a world of good ; but here is Lady Mordaunt, who does not like it half so well. I found her lost on the downs, and have brought her to you to be made dry and warm."

Having thus gracefully introduced his new friend, Rollo rushed away in hot pursuit after a small brother, who had been making derisive faces at him through the

banister-rails. Screams of laughter were heard, and then the sound of Rollo's flying feet, carrying him five steps at a time up to his room.



CHAPTER II.

MOST warm and friendly was Miss Harrington's welcome to her unexpected guest. With all her brother's genial kindliness, there was, besides, in her manner a gentle, considerate thoughtfulness that at once bespoke her to be the mother-sister of the large family at the Grange. And no one, looking at Margaret Harrington's clear, bright eyes and energetic ways, would have guessed that she was blind and helpless. Yet this was the case. Hopelessly blind were those pleasant eyes; and for many months past she had lain a patient

prisoner on her couch. Nevertheless even Rollo himself scarcely looked more cheerful, and in her helplessness she was the helper of all.

"Eleanor—Katie!" she cried, and in a moment folding-doors were thrown open, and from an inner room there hurried to her several bright-faced little sisters. They scarcely needed her directions to them to assist Verina in laying aside her dripping hat, and cape, and gloves, for at once they all sprang to her aid.

Rather shyly did Verina stand amongst her eager little friends, but with such gentle smiles on her sweet face that none were repulsed by her shy silence.

When all had been done that could be done to fulfil Rollo's injunction "to make Lady Mordaunt dry and warm," Miss Harrington said :

"Now, dear children, tea has been waiting for you so long that I'm afraid that it

will be getting cold, so run away. You need not quite shut the doors," she added, smiling, "for I know you will not like to lose sight of Lady Mordaunt. And now, will you come and sit by me, Lady Mordaunt? for I cannot come to you," she continued with her friendly smile.

Verina took a seat close to the invalid's sofa, feeling as she did so that the cheerful atmosphere of the bright home-scene was a very cheering contrast to the rain without, and her own unhappy home.

Through the half-open doors the round tea-table was visible, surrounded by the bright, rosy faces of the "children," as Miss Harrington called them, though there were several elder girls among the group, and the tall, bright Rollo himself sat in the seat of honour, distributing mingled tea and fun. The laughter and merriment going on — though a little suppressed in consequence of Lady Mordaunt's proxi-

mity—was more than sufficient to be very cheering to her, and to prevent her conversation with Miss Harrington being audible to the rest.

“ I am so glad to see you at *last*,” began Miss Harrington ;—“ ah, I never can get out of the old way of talking of *seeing* people.” She smiled with some amusement at herself, and went on : “ Somehow I have thought much of you. When you arrived here first I made the children describe you to me. The description I received was such an enthusiastic one that I wish I could remember the words, for they would amuse you. I feel, too, as if I knew you already ; for I learn so much from a person’s voice, and yours is just what I imagined it.”

She spoke in a tone of such genial kindness that Verina felt irresistibly attracted towards her ; and she said earnestly :

“ It was, after all, very good-natured of

the rain to wet me through. I wish I had been here before, but——”

Verina stopped abruptly in some confusion ; she was afraid that she might be on dangerous ground.

Miss Harrington only smiled and said :

“ Fortunately we ladies need not trouble ourselves about politics or political quarrels. We will not even talk about such disagreeable things. Let me rather tell you that when I have been lying here a prisoner, it has often been quite a pleasure to think of you and how happy you are in your beautiful home with your little girl to play with, and not only your husband, but also his mother and sisters to make much of you.”

Verina was silent. Then there came over her an irresistible impulse to confide in her kindly hostess.

“ Did you hear of my accident ?” she asked.

"Yes, indeed I did, and regretted it so much. How could it have happened?"

"I did it intentionally," answered Verina, in a low voice of great emotion.

An expression of utter horror passed over Miss Harrington's quiet face.

"Ah, I ought not to have told you; now you, too, will turn away from me; but I did it because I was so wretched that I thought I could not bear to live a moment longer."

The sorrowful words, and the sorrowful accent so touching in one so young, turned all Miss Harrington's horror into compassion. She drew Verina to her, as if she had been one of her own sisters.

"You poor child! and I thought you so happy," she said.

It was so long since any one had shown Verina any tenderness, that Miss Harrington's moved her greatly; but she would

not let her tears fall—she only said falteringly :

“ I have often wondered since whether it was very wrong. Do you think it was ?”

“ Yes, I am sure it was,” answered Miss Harrington decidedly, though with great gentleness. “ You cannot call such an act submission to God’s will. How was it, too, that you did not think of your little girl ?”

“ I was too engrossed with one other thought,” said Verina. “ Ah, my little Evelyn, how could I have forgotten you ?”

“ Even for her sake alone it must always be your duty to endeavour to preserve your life,” continued Miss Harrington. “ What could she do without your love and care ? Fancy her growing up alone among servants and governesses, who might be indifferent, perhaps unkind — would you willingly let her thus yearn in vain for a mother’s tenderness ?”

"Oh, no, no," cried the young mother. "Henceforth I will bear all things for her sake. Yes, it is far better that the sorrow should be mine, than my wee darling's."

Miss Harrington still looked far from satisfied.

"I am many years older than you," she said, "so you must let me speak freely to you, and say that your love for your child is not the reason that should have influenced you."

"What else could?" asked Verina, in surprise.

"The remembrance that your Heavenly Father, who permits your afflictions, bids you bear all things with patience, and sorrow is a mark of His love; for often it is sorrow alone that has power to remind us of Him and heaven. And make us know Him as He is—the real end of life."

With a sudden remembrance of her girlish reveries, Verina's thoughtful eyes

turned upon her companion an eager, inquiring gaze, but as she was silent, Miss Harrington for a moment said no more.

Presently she spoke again, and very earnestly.

"Lady Mordaunt, promise me that you will never again attempt so desperate an act—an act that to me seems scarcely possible to have been committed by one who has so sweet and gentle a voice."

Verina smiled a little—a very little.

"I think that it is we gentle ones who would, when roused, do the most desperate things," she said. "Yes, I do promise you that in future I will be more patient; but, oh, you do not know how heart-sick I was. Do not think worse of me than I deserve. It was no momentary sorrow; I would have borne that. Mine is an endless, hopeless sorrow, and I am weary of it—so very weary."

Verina sobbed convulsively.

Miss Harrington could only caress in silence the soft hand she held. All she had heard of the young Lady Mordaunt had induced her to believe her life a peculiarly happy one; and it greatly moved her to find how deep a grief this apparent felicity concealed.

After a time she said, laying her hand on a book beside her :

“Let me read you something that has often comforted me. It was written by a monk long ago,” she explained, as she sought the place she wanted. She ran her slight fingers over the raised type, and read : “ ‘ Be not wearied out, nor let tribulation cast thee down ever at all ; but let My promises strengthen and comfort thee under every circumstance. I am well able to reward thee above all measure and degree. Thou shalt not long toil here, nor always be oppressed with griefs. There will come an hour when all labour and

trouble shall cease. Peace shall come in a day which is known unto the Lord, and it shall not be *day* and *night*, but unceasing brightness, infinite light, steadfast peace, secure rest. Then thou shalt not say, "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" nor cry, "Woe is me that my sojourning is prolonged!" for death shall be cast down headlong, and there shall be salvation that can never fail; no more anxiety, but blessed joy—society sweet and noble. Lift up thy face, therefore, unto heaven. Behold I and all My saints with Me, who in this world had great conflicts, do now rejoice, are now comfortable, now secure, now at rest, and shall remain with Me everlastingly in the kingdom of My Father.' "

The calm, reverent tone of voice suited well with the noble words it read; and as Verina listened, for the first time there beamed upon her a glimpse of that life

within—life which raises its possessors above the storms and cares of earth, into a region calm and fair, and full of wondrous peace.

“That is very beautiful,” Verina said, low and gravely. She continued in a voice whose sad weariness was very touching, “*Rest*; yes, that is what I need.”

“Then make it yours.”

“But how can I? Ah, teach me, teach me! My earthly hopes seem fading from me — oh, give me in their place these heavenly hopes.”

“It is not *I* who can do so,” Margaret answered; “but there is, you know, One who would gladly give you all knowledge. And when you have learnt to possess His love, and to realise this and His nearness to you, you will no longer feel a rebellious despair. In this world even you will have ‘rest.’ Then it is so easy to be patient.”

Margaret's sightless eyes were no longer turned towards her companion. In thought she had passed far away, and her face grew radiant with the calmest peace.

As Verina looked at her she felt certain that no murmur could ever pass Margaret's pale lips, or dwell in her quiet heart.

"And you can do all this—feel all this," she said; "you, who have so much to suffer—you who can never see 'the blessed light of the sun.' Oh, Miss Harrington," she continued, with sudden, deep compassion, "how much I pity you for that; it is too dreadful. I cannot bear to think that you are blind."

"Do not pity me," answered Margaret, smiling brightly. "I am very happy."

"Alas! then how different we must be! I cannot bear with patience, even the recollection of my trials—I could never be resigned."

“Once I thought the same ; and if in the days when I and Robin used to wander for miles and miles over these downs, where now I can walk but a few yards ; and I used to triumph over him in beating him in our childish races, and in seeing the far-off things he could not see—if then, any one had assured me that the time during which I was lying here, a blind and helpless prisoner, would be one of the happiest times of my life, I could not have believed the prophecy. Yet it would have been a most true prophecy. My present happiness is far deeper than the mere buoyancy of youth and health.”

“Will you tell me how you found this strange happiness ?” said Verina.

“To do so I must first give you the history of my life ; and I think that you will be tired of me and the Grange before so long a story is finished.”

“Tired of being here ? ah, you do not

know what a luxury it is to me to be among friends!"

When the words had escaped her, Verina blushed at the passionate vehemence of her tone. She felt that it had betrayed more than she wished to betray. She was far too loyal to her husband to willingly censure him to any.

"Dear Lady Mordaunt, you must, in future, come here very often," said Margaret tenderly. She respected the young wife for the reserve she had throughout maintained; and she had no difficulty in believing that Sir Arthur Mordaunt's wife would not necessarily be a happy woman. She knew from his dispute with her brother that he was most capricious and violent-tempered.

"Yes, I will come here so often that you will be weary of the very sound of my voice," said Verina, making an effort to speak lightly. "And do not send me

away now, for it is raining hard still ; but tell me the story of your life. If I knew it, and how you learnt this happiness, perhaps I, too, might find it."



CHAPTER III.

I AM not fond of talking of myself," said Margaret ; " but, somehow, I feel as if we were old friends, and I would gladly do anything to lead you to that inexhaustible fountain of peace, to have found which is my daily rejoicing ; so if you really wish it, I will tell you my story, in the hope that doing so may be of use to you.

" To begin then : I and my eldest brother Robert are twins. Between us and even Rollo, who comes next, there are many years : and between us and the numerous little ones there is so great a difference in age that we have always felt towards them

a parental rather than a fraternal love. When our father and his wife were dead, Robin and I took, therefore, quite naturally the place of their parents to our young sisters and brothers. A short time before our father died, poor Robert had come home, to seek comfort from his twin-sister for the loss by death of his affianced bride. This twin sister was herself betrothed, but though my destined home was only a few miles distant, I was determined not to leave the Grange till Eleanor was old enough to take my place to the rest, and to be a companion to Robin. Thus there appeared to lie before me a life of most earnest and welcome duties ; and I rejoiced in my strength and activity that seemed so fully to fit me for them. Imagine, therefore, with what anxiety I became aware that a strange dimness was growing over my sight. I would not at first allow to myself that there was any well-founded

cause for alarm ; but at length I paid a secret visit to an eminent oculist ; you may judge of my feelings when he told me that he feared the case was a hopeless one, and that in a short time I should be irretrievably blind. He did what he could for me, and described to me the various symptoms that would appear, if his view of my case were correct. I returned home. I could not tell my awful secret even to Robin. Fancy, if you can, the solitary agony of the long weeks that followed, as symptom after symptom appeared, and slowly, but all too surely, my sight grew fainter still. I think I was almost beside myself—I who so rejoiced in the beauty of nature, and in my own helpfulness. To me it was a fearful thought that soon endless night would be around me, and that I should be dependent for the slightest effort on those whom I had meant should depend for everything on me. I could not eat ; I

could not sleep ; I could not occupy myself in anything. When I was with the rest, I used to make a pretence of doing so ; but directly I was alone, the book or work was thrown aside, and, in my restless misery, I used to wander aimlessly from room to room, looking my last at the old familiar things.

“ I grew so thin and pale that Robert became quite uneasy, and was always questioning me. I used to put him off with some slight answer. This did not satisfy him ; but I think he soon discovered that I could not bear my strange ways to be noticed, and so he left off asking me what was the matter ; but he watched me most anxiously. Poor Robin ! How often, if I suddenly raised my eyes, I used to meet a wistful look bent on me. It was for his sake, almost as much as for my own, that I dreaded my blindness ; for I was his constant companion, his assistant in every

pursuit ; and there was nothing he liked so well as for me to read aloud to him. Though he bore with Christian fortitude the loss of his bride, still, at times, a deep sadness would come over him. Then he would seek me, and sit down beside me, and covering his face with his hands, he would say : ‘ Will you read to me, dear Maggie ? ’ and he would sit thus gladly listening to me for an hour or more. My reading to him, he used to say, ‘ soothed him as nothing else could. ’

“ To do this for him was to me so great a pleasure. Now, many a time, I had the pang of being obliged to find some excuse for refusing.

“ The brightness of the lamp of an evening used to give my eyes great pain, and dazzle them so that I could scarcely distinguish my sisters one from the other. Therefore I used, on a plea—which was true enough — of headache, to ensconce

myself, evening after evening, in some dark corner, and sit there, with closed eyes, in a silent misery, which was great—beyond my powers of description. Certainly I must have been then very unlike my old self ; and poor Robin might well ask me—as he once did—‘ what had become of his bright Margaret ?’

“ One evening one of the little ones brought some great treasure of his to my dark corner. He was very anxious for my opinion on it, and when I told him that it was so dark that I could not see it, he entreated me, just for one moment, to come to the light. Most unwillingly did I comply ; but the poor child was so earnest in his entreaty that I could not refuse. Nor had I considered that during the days which had elapsed since I had steadily encountered so bright a light, my sight must have grown much worse.

“ Exultingly he placed his treasure

before me. Alas! all I saw was a dark object—what it was I had not the faintest conception, and I made such an inappropriate remark that the children began to laugh, and Robert exclaimed: ‘Margaret is an owl; she can only see in the dark!’ I burst into tears and rushed from the room. Robert, in great distress, pursued me, and entreated me to tell him my sorrow. I could not bring myself to do so; I could only lean my head upon his shoulder, and cry in bitter grief. He was terribly distressed, but when I begged him not to ask me the cause of my tears, much as he longed to know it, he said no more about them—only tried to cheer me with tender words.

“One other day, at this time, is deeply engrossed on my memory; and to make you fully understand my wretchedness, I must relate it to you. I had shut myself up alone in my bedroom. It was autumn,

and the long autumn twilight was just beginning. I could see best when the glare of daylight was fading; and in a most dreary mood, I now sat down on the window-seat and looked out into the quiet evening. Vividly do I recall everything that then met my sight; for it was almost the last time I beheld that scene—familiar to me since I was a child; and so I have treasured that last view of it, and I often picture it to myself.

“My bedroom window looks out into a long quiet alley of mountain ash. They stand so closely together, and overhead meet in so intricate an embrace, that to look up the long alley is like looking up a tunnel of green boughs. It is a lovely little walk. This evening it was in all its beauty; the gravel of the pathway had been washed white by recent rains, and the low banks on either side were one mass of creeping ivy, with its dark glittering leaves

and twining red stems, relieved here and there by the pale blue petals of the periwinkle, and by the broad foliage of the coltsfoot. In this fairy-like carpet stood the mountain ash-trees, in a long array—their branches almost weighed down beneath heavy clusters of crimson berries ; and up and down the alley fluttered two black-birds in half-angry pursuit of each other, brushing noiselessly past the red berries, on soft, black outspread wings, and every now and then uttering their sweet though querulous cry, or perching on some slender spray that danced again beneath their golden feet. As I sat thus, drinking in the beauty of the scene, my fate seemed more and more intolerable. I could hear Robin at play with the children in the garden below, and with agony I thought of the time when I should see all the dear faces no more. I should then never, I thought, know when my brothers and sisters

were happy or sad, well or ill ; for how should I be able to know more than they cared to tell ? Robert, especially, who never complained, how should I learn when he needed cheering ? Now, one glance at his expressive face told me all I wished to know. In future how would it be ? The anguish of such thoughts became unbearable. In my great despair I sank down beside the window-seat ; I bowed my head down upon my clasped hands. I will not attempt to further describe to you the misery of that hour, and I only speak of it to show you that it was a real sorrow, for which I have found an unfailing cure. But, as yet, I had, you see, no hope, no wish beyond this earth, and most fiercely did I rebel against my fate. At length, however, there came a change, and it was no transitory one, for the peace and patience that came to me then never again wholly left me, but grew daily deeper and

firmer ; and is, at this very hour, one of the most cherished blessings of my lot. How and whence it came I will not interrupt my narrative to tell you yet. I will only say I became a new, and once more happy, Margaret, because I was led to become a Christian in deed and in truth. And to prove that I was thus become a new Margaret, I must tell you still a little more about myself. The pain of suddenly encountering a bright light, or the sight of my sisters' little, sweet faces, did certainly at times bring back a reflection of my old agony ; but I could once more occupy myself, and I began to share in the amusements of the children as I had not done for long. One evening when the little ones were gone to bed, leaving Robert and I alone together, I thought that it would be the moment to tell him of my impending fate. I knew that I could now do it calmly.

"I rose and stood beside him, laying my hand upon his shoulder. 'Robin,' I said, 'I am going blind.' I could say the words so quietly now. He started up, he would not believe me. But when I repeated to him all that the oculist had said, without another word he sat down again and covered his face with his hands, in an agony of grief such as I had never witnessed in him before—except once. The tears were for me, they were not prompted by any selfish thought for himself. Then from my heart I exclaimed: 'My Robin! how could I repine at anything when I have still my second self. You will be eyes for me; and after all, I dare say that I shall manage wonderfully.' Then he roused himself, and began eagerly and hurriedly to imagine and to detail every possible alleviation of my lot. Thus we comforted one another. We agreed that my intended husband must at once be made acquainted

with my misfortune. I never imagined that he would forsake me because of it ; my trust in him was too perfect to admit one such doubting fear. Yet so it was. I do not even now believe but that if he had been left to follow, without bias, the dictates of his own heart, he would have remained true to me, and would not have forsaken me simply because I now, more than ever, needed his love and protection. But he was not so left, and he did forsake me. He did not answer Robert's letter for some time ; then he came to stay a few days with us, but both his letter and his presence were unlike his former self. He had not been long gone before he wrote again to Robert, telling him in words that were painfully cold and formal that he hoped that Robert and I would agree with him in thinking that, 'under existing circumstances,' the engagement between us had better cease ! To me

he did not write even one word. Oh, it was hard thus to part; hard thus to find that my idol was clay indeed, to have my whole long-dreamt-of future—the future that I had pictured so bright, so active, so happy—thus shattered at a blow.

“This sorrow was in truth far heavier than the first, but I no longer had to wrestle with my grief in my own strength alone, and now through the darkest hours there shone the light of heaven, so it was not long before I could smile again, and could calmly put away from me for ever all thoughts of ‘what might have been.’”

Verina, who had throughout listened with deepest interest, now interrupted her companion, by asking incredulously and most pitifully :

“And are you *really* happy?”

“Indeed I am,” Margaret answered, with her bright smile. “Do I not look so?” and she turned towards Verina her

pleasant face beaming with quiet peace. "And is it not fortunate that I am content, for if I were not, how could I make others happy? Those children would not then cluster round my sofa, declaring that I am the very embodiment of home, and all such foolish, fond things. Besides, it has all turned out better than I expected. When I can walk about, I can do great things in the way of helping myself and others; and Robin finds that he likes reading to me, quite as much as my old readings to him; and above all, I can trust to see, one day, lovelier flowers and fairer skies than those which I shall behold no more on earth."

Verina was deeply touched by the bright patience in Margaret's looks and words.

"How unlike you are to every one else," she said. "Others seem to close their eyes to all blessings, and notice only their deprivations. You do just the contrary."

You would find something pleasant everywhere."

"I trust so!" replied Miss Harrington, smiling. "Patience brings this power as its own reward. When we walk our life-path with a quiet step and tranquil mind, it is easy to notice the fragrance and the beauty of all the little flowers which grow beside even the most rugged path. But it is impossible to see them when we are flying down that path with frantic speed, and eyes blinded by rebellious passion. We do not then note one of the sunbeams that are shooting across the clouds around us. We will have the sun itself or nothing; and yet if carefully garnered those tiny rays would have formed a goodly sheaf!"

Verina looked at her rather wonderingly and then said:

"But you have not yet told me how you learnt to be so happy and so patient.

Will you not now begin to do so? for indeed I long to be like you."

Before Miss Harrington could answer, a clock struck the hour. Verina listened to it in some dismay: there was little time left for her homeward ride, and to keep dinner waiting was a great offence in Lady Catherine's eyes.

"I did not know it was so late," she said sorrowfully. "I am afraid that I must go at once, and I have not yet heard what I most want to hear!"

Margaret understood her evident uneasiness at the lateness of the hour, so she did not attempt to detain her.

"Never mind," she said, "we will keep that for another day, and I will not even wish to delay you now."

So Rollo was called, and volunteered to bring her horse himself; though, as he said, he would greatly prefer taking off its saddle and bridle, and after various re-

proaches to Margaret about her having monopolised *his* friend, he accordingly darted away.

When Rollo was gone Verina said thoughtfully :

“What you have said about finding a happiness independent of our earthly troubles, has indeed sounded wonderfully beautiful to me ; but though I dare say I may have *heard* such things before, I never before *listened* to them, so they are so new to me that I cannot at once make them *my own*. Without more help from you, I am sure I can never be a second Margaret Harrington—nay, even with your help, I could never be *quite* like you ;” and with a sudden impulsive tenderness she bent over Margaret and kissed her.

Margaret answered :

“Do not say that. We will see what wonders a few more *talks* will perform ! You must spend many afternoons with me.

Come to me whenever you want cheering.
Come, and be one more sister among us.
You do not know how many warm hearts
ready to love you the Grange contains.
You have long ago quite captivated even
the children !”

“Ah, if you knew how pleasant your
words sound to me !” and the friendless
Verina’s eyes swam in tears.

“Dear Lady Mordaunt, I am half afraid
that you have even more to try you than
I have ever had, for you have no
twin-brother ; and you are, I fancy, of a
more dependent nature—one who needs
to be cherished under a warm wing !”
Margaret spoke with a wistful tender-
ness.

Verina did not reply except by a caress ;
but presently she said :

“I am not very old yet, I am only nine-
teen ; I may grow more independent in
time.”

Miss Harrington's quick ear caught the suppressed sigh that followed.

Rollo appeared, with a melancholy air, to announce that Verina's horse was ready. He was followed by a troop of eager brothers and sisters, who all clamorously surrounded Verina, entreating her "to come back soon," because "they had *so much* to show her—so many pigeons, and rabbits, and dogs!" and little Nelly stole into her lap, clasped her little white arms round her, and softly, half shyly whispered, "You will love little Nelly, won't you?"

"Mind and lose yourself again very soon," were Rollo's last words. He had accompanied her to the brow of the ravine. Verina looked back at him with a smile, and often, in future years, did she recall the bright, warm friendliness that shone towards her from her boy-friend's face, as he stood there looking after her.



CHAPTER IV.

WHEN Verina reached Mordaunt Hall, she found, rather to her relief, that it was not quite so late as she had thought. In spite, however, of her utmost haste she was still five minutes late. Every one seemed put out in consequence. The dinner-time was more dreary even than usual. Sir Arthur abused the servants, Lady Catherine complained bitterly of the "*cold*" soup, Lydia and Amelia mutually contradicted everything the other said; and Verina, not venturing to say much, thought enviously of the cheerful tea-table at the Grange, with

the bright group round it of merry, loving faces.

The ladies retired to the drawing-room. Lady Catherine seated herself on the sofa in her erect attitude, and looked more severe than ever, as she rebuked the servants for having let the fire burn low. Amelia threw herself into an armchair, exclaiming, "How horribly dull it is, in this stupid place, without some friends to amuse one!"

To which remark Lydia sharply replied: "I wish you would keep your thoughts to yourself if they are not more agreeable."

"They are as agreeable as anything *you* are likely to say!" retorted Amelia.

For ten minutes the sisters continued thus to bicker. Then they also subsided into a dreary silence.

At a little drawing-table in the embrasure of the window sat Verina, meanwhile, intent on the completion of a pencil sketch.

Both the Miss Mordaunts were showily dressed; both were young and passably handsome. Nevertheless there was something repelling in their looks—the poisonous atmosphere of a life of heartless frivolity and dissipation having put its mark upon them. In it, Amelia had acquired a constant peevishly-discontented air; and Lydia had grown hard and impracticable and defiant.

It was a relief to turn from the bright colours of their toilets, and from their world-worn countenances, to their young sister-in-law's simple dress, and girlishly-pure, earnest face. Her dress was of one pale delicate colour; her hair arranged very simply, though with great taste, and displaying none of the elaborate curl and plaits wherein her sisters-in-law rejoiced. She wore no ornaments. She had a habit of forgetting all earrings, bracelets, and necklaces, for which, of course, she was

often and sharply reproved by Lady Catherine.

Two years and a half of married life had robbed her thoughtful face of none of its frank, brave innocence, and though in her shining eyes there was a restless light that told of a heart ill at ease, nevertheless, on looking at her it was not difficult to perceive, that she had passed with her innocence unsullied through all the careless worldliness which had of late surrounded her. Perhaps she was indebted for this, less to any resolves of her own, than to the poetic ideality of her temperament which raised her above its allurements.

“By-the-bye, Verina,” said Lydia, “what became of you in the thunder-storm?”

Verina did not reply at once, for she did not feel very certain how her adventure would be received. Although she answered rather reluctantly :

"The Harringtons gave me a shelter."

There was a murmur of utter amazement, and Lydia exclaimed:


"How could you have made their acquaintance? Do you not know, too, how shamefully Mr. Harrington behaved in the last election—making all his people vote against Arthur? and that Arthur detests him, and makes a point of doing and saying everything he can to annoy him?"

"Then it was very noble of his sister to have been so hospitable to me—that's all," said Verina with spirit.

"She wanted to get over you—wanted to be forgiven, because she had heard of the balls here, and thought it would be pleasant to display herself at them."

Verina's eyes flashed, as they were only too ready to flash, at the Mordaunt habit of imputing selfish motives to every one.

"How unjust! how ungenerous! poor Miss Harrington is blind," she exclaimed.



Lydia laughed, delighted to have provoked her sister to indignation. Hitherto Lady Catherine had maintained a portentous silence. She now said: "Instead of giving way to your usual *violence*, I should advise you to consider what excuse you can give to Arthur for——"

Lydia interrupted her impatiently: "Pray leave me to fight my own battles. I assure you I am quite capable of doing so."

Lady Catherine was too prudent ever to continue a dispute with Lydia, who then turned again to Verina.

"*I* should advise you to keep your adventure *from* Arthur," she said. "Even I should not have dared to have done such a thing as visit those Harringtons; and nothing could be more irritating to him than to hear that his wife had been passing a sociable afternoon with his sworn foes."

Did you ever see Arthur in one of his furies ?”

“ I do not know what you mean—I have seen him angry,” said Verina rather uneasily.

“ Angry ! yes, I dare say, for he is that most days, not being blessed with the most placable of tempers ; but I do not think that you have yet made acquaintance with one of his outbreaks of fury. I assure you it’s a sight to see.”

And Lydia, humming the end of a song, watched Verina’s uneasy face with great amusement.

“ I had quite forgotten everything about the Harringtons,” she said ; “ but now I do begin to remember that when I first came here, Arthur said he did not wish me to make their acquaintance. I had forgotten the name and everything. If Arthur did but really know them, he could not be annoyed at my having visited them !”

"You seem very enthusiastic about your husband's enemies," said Lady Catherine dryly.

"His 'enemies'! what can that gentle, blind, angel-like Miss Harrington have done to him?"

"The insolence of your manner is intolerable."

"Really, Lady Catherine, I do not see why I may not express my——"

Sir Arthur here joined the not very amicable party, and there was a sudden silence. It was broken by Lady Catherine's saying sententiously, "You will be surprised to hear, Arthur, that your wife has spent this whole afternoon in the most friendly manner with those insolent Harringtons."

"What!" cried Sir Arthur, as if incapable of understanding such an amazing communication.

Lady Catherine calmly repeated her words.

In silence, Verina bent still over her drawing, and Amelia privately congratulated herself that she was not her sister-in-law.

Sir Arthur replied in a tone that was ominously calm. "You must be strangely mistaken; Verina knows my wishes too well. Verina, I beg that you will at once explain all this."

Verina answered firmly. "I am really sorry, Arthur, if I have acted contrary to your wishes; but it is no misunderstanding of Lady Catherine's. It is perfectly true that I have passed the afternoon with Miss Harrington."

"And what excuse have you to give for so disobeying my orders?" Sir Arthur asked in the same terribly calm tone. "Be so good as to answer me," he continued, as Verina hesitated to reply.

"I did not remember that you had objected to my going there," she said at length.

“That is no excuse—you ought not to have forgotten.”

“And it was raining hard, my habit was wet through.”

“I do not see how that necessitated your remaining at the Grange—in defiance too of all I have said on the subject.”

“But they begged me to come in,” continued Verina timidly.

“They did! their confounded insolence!” cried Sir Arthur, forsaking his calm tone and bursting into a torrent of passionate words. “How dared they ask my wife to enter their house! and you, how did you venture to listen to them! how dared you so disobey me!”

Lydia would have spoken. “Be silent!” he cried fiercely—his tone enforcing even her obedience; then followed one of those terrible outbursts of anger which are painful for any one to witness. Verina had

never before seen or imagined such a sight as that of a man beside himself with uncontrolled passion. All the colour left her cheeks, and she listened to Sir Arthur in silence, her eyes fixed on him in speechless, wondering terror.

He declared he would allow no further excuses ; narrated in loud and angry tones his grievances against that scoundrel Harrington, and heaped on Verina every term of reproach, upbraiding her with the utmost violence.

Only Lady Catherine ventured to speak ; and she by an occasional well-timed word added fuel to his wrath. Her respect for the proprieties of life never forsook her, even on the most trying occasions : she therefore attempted to induce her son to be silent when the servants entered with coffee. Her attempts were vain. Sir Arthur's fury had borne him far beyond any consideration for appearance, and no

one's presence would have had power to stem the torrent of his words.

At length his anger seemed almost to have exhausted itself. An awful silence ensued. Verina offered no remonstrance, no excuses ; but her over-wrought feelings would bear no further control. She rested her hands on the drawing-stand before her, and leant her head down upon them, sobbing in an abandonment of grief, like a terrified child. For many minutes her low heart-rent sobs were the only sounds that broke the stillness of the room. Sir Arthur was the first to speak, and addressing Verina in a tone that brooked no disobedience, he desired her to leave the room.

The fire in Verina's sitting-room was almost out, and in vain did she ring again and again for lights. "I am not a child to be so treated," she thought with passionate indignation, as she knelt beside the dying

fire ; her husband's fierce, cruel words still ringing in her ears—the whole scene acting itself over and over again before her with most tormenting pertinacity. At length, across her excited, resentfully-indignant mood there came a softer feeling—a heart-sick longing to be again in her old, peaceful home, where, instead of angry words and perpetual contention, there was her father's unfailing gentleness, and Gretchen's warm affection.

All that next day, Verina thought with longing of the tender friendship and warm welcome that was awaiting her in vain at the Grange. When she had parted from Margaret, she had been full of the cheering hope that the Grange would in future be a refuge she might always seek, when heart-sick with the ever-increasing injustice and unkindness of her home.

Much as Verina regretted Sir Arthur's prohibition of her one friendship, and even

of "any further intercourse of any kind with Miss Harrington," she did not even imagine the possibility of disregarding that prohibition. It terrified her to discover how violent Sir Arthur could be; and she had far too sensitive a dread of harsh words to intentionally provoke him to a second outbreak of such anger.

Therefore, never again did Verina see the pleasant Grange and its kindly mistress. In church she often caught sight of Rollo and his brothers; but Margaret never attempted to attend so distant a church as that of Mr. Norris. Verina frequently met Rollo's eyes, and longed to give him at least a smile: but she did not dare, other eyes than Rollo's might be watching her. As Rollo explained to his sister, he had now a greater pleasure than ever in staring at Lady Mordaunt, because he saw how he thereby provoked that "detestable Sir Arthur. Therefore," said Rollo, "I always

look at her with an expression of tender interest, as if she was my dearest friend—in truth I wish she was.”

Miss Harrington only replied that she did not think such a mood the right one in which to attend church ; but though she said less about Lady Mordaunt, she regretted her even more than Rollo did. She had no difficulty in guessing why she never came again ; and often and often she thought with dread of what would be the fate of one so impulsive, so impassioned, and so loving, with none to befriend or counsel her while still so young.

The regret was mutual : not only that first day, but often and with a tender longing did Verina recall that last good-bye at the Grange—Miss Harrington’s warm hand-clasp, little Nelly’s soft request, and Rollo’s beaming friendliness ; and the music of loving looks and tones with which that quiet home scene was ringing. As years passed on,

this remembrance became dim and indistinct; but even in its dimness, it was to Verina a vision of most tender beauty. The holy words, few but earnest, that Miss Harrington had spoken, left, however, but a very brief impression. As Verina had said, the ideas were all so new to her, that she could not at once make them "her own." Still it was always a pleasure to her to recall Margaret's face of perfect peace. Often in her darkest hours that face arose before her, smiling on her with its tranquil smile, as a vision from a happier sphere.



CHAPTER V.

FOR once the Miss Mordaunts were unanimous. They both declared that six months' solitude at Mordaunt Hall was as much as any one could be expected to endure ; and that therefore this solitude must be now in some way enlivened.

It did not suit Lady Catherine to go to London for some time yet, but had not dear Lady Sinclair been ordered change of air ? Where would she be more welcome than at Mordaunt Hall ? And how would it be possible to invite her there, without a few more friends to meet her and her

daughters? It being impossible to answer these various questions otherwise than in the affirmative, once more were invitations written and preparations made for a great gathering at Mordaunt Hall, during the Easter holidays. The invitations were readily accepted, and the afternoon of a long spring day brought the Sinclairs and various other guests. Times were changed since that first memorable party assembled there. Its young mistress could not now escape cold and ceremonious greetings, by taking refuge by her husband's side—jesting with him and caressed by him!

That same evening Verina entered the drawing-room unusually early. She had expected to find no one there, believing that all but herself would be still busied with their toilets. She was therefore surprised at catching sight of the folds of a gauzy blue dress, which was half hidden behind the white curtains of the window.

The owner of the blue dress was herself almost concealed by these same white curtains. She appeared desirous of this concealment; and it struck Verina, that whoever she might be, she had been prompted to descend to the drawing-room, thus early, by the same expectation of being there alone as had induced Verina to do the like. When she heard Verina, with a quick movement she turned her face towards her; then as hastily averted it and shrank deeper back among the sheltering curtains and gazed out of the window with apparent earnestness. It was a pretty and very youthful face with fair brown hair, coral red lips and rounded cheeks, which looked as if they ought to wear a very rosy hue; now they were pale, and there were traces of tears in the blue eyes and long wet lashes. That one glimpse which she had allowed Verina to have of her, had enabled Verina to recognise her as a Miss Vivian—an orphan.

niece of Lady Sinclair's, to whose care the young girl had been lately confided by an old adoring uncle, who fancied that his pet niece ought to have greater "advantages" than any he could afford her.

When Miss Vivian had that afternoon been introduced to Lady Catherine—not to Verina—Verina, who was present, had thought to herself that such a simple-hearted country girl as Miss Vivian looked, was not very likely to find the Miss Sinclairs congenial companions. Verina had naturally felt sympathy for one who appeared situated much as she had herself been once. And now, as she caught sight of the tearful eyes, she felt a desire to go to the orphan girl, and beg her to confide her grief to her. Verina was certain that it was not possible that Miss Vivian could place any such confidences in the volatile, talkative Sinclairs, and her heart was drawn towards one, apparently almost as friendless

here as herself. She was, however, restrained by the thought, that perhaps Miss Vivian might not like her distress to be noticed, so Verina said nothing, but sat down and dreamily looked through one of the gorgeously-bound volumes that lay on the table.

Miss Vivian had as quickly recognised Verina for the lady whose face had greatly attracted her, when she, and her aunt, and her cousins, had been, on their first arrival, ushered into the drawing-room. She fancied her to be one of the numerous guests. That the youthful, gentle-looking lady was Lady Mordaunt, she did not for one moment imagine. The accounts which she had heard of Lady Mordaunt led her to expect a very different person. A tall, masculine woman, with a harsh voice, a haughty air, and unpleasing manners, was Miss Vivian's notion of Lady Catherine's much-abused daughter-in-law.

Miss Vivian half wished her companion would speak to her. Her heart was very full, she would gladly ask counsel of any one whom she could trust, and she felt certain she might trust this gentle lady. It was very true that she did not and could not confide anything to her cousins.

But Miss Vivian was very shy, and as Verina did not address her, she remained silent.

At length she began to fear that by so early an appearance in the drawing-room, she might be breaking one of Lady Sinclair's much-talked-about "rules of society." This sudden dread lest she was committing a flagrant breach of good manners, gave her courage to address Verina. She said shyly :

"Perhaps you know the ways of this house, and can tell me if I ought not to have come down here so early. But," she went on hurriedly, as if to excuse herself,

"the Miss Mordaunts and my cousins are so noisy upstairs, and I wanted to be quiet."

As she spoke the last words the tears rose to her eyes again ; Verina came to her side and said :

"Will you not tell me what it is that distresses you ? Perhaps I could help you in some way, and indeed you may safely trust me."

"Yes—yes, I am sure of that," said Miss Vivian, brushing away her tears. "And I would gladly confide in you, if I could feel sure you would not repeat to any one what I say, for I want some one's counsel very much, and I have no friend here."

"I will not betray your secret to any one," Verina answered.

The earnestness of her assurance and the gentle pity in her voice removed Miss Vivian's last prudent doubts. Yielding to the longing for sympathy and guidance

natural to her youth, she falteringly confessed the cause of her grief.

“I ought not to have come to this house, it was very wrong of me,” she said ; “and now I do not know what to do, and I have no one to consult.”

“Wrong to have come here ! how can that be ?” asked Verina in surprise.

Then in broken words and with burning blushes, and many injunctions to secrecy, Miss Vivian answered that she ought not to have come, “because it was Sir Arthur Mordaunt’s house.”

Verina grew very pale. Miss Vivian went on :

“I must tell you all, or you will not be able to advise me. A few months ago, shortly after I had come to stay with my aunt, Sir Arthur Mordaunt arrived there on a visit. He must have taken a fancy to me, for in every way he tried to make me love him—and oh, he has succeeded

only too well ! Certainly, he never actually said he loved me, in words I mean—in every other way he said it every hour—and we were *so* happy together. Oh, those pleasant evening walks in the garden, when he used to lead me away from the rest ! and all those happy hours which we have spent together, I can never, never forget them. All this happy time I never doubted that he wished to make me his wife. I knew nothing of the Berkshire families ; and I could not imagine that a married man could go on as he did. And no one ever spoke of his wife. At last I found out that he was married. I was overwhelmed by the discovery ; but when I passionately reproached my cousins for not having told me this before, they only laughed and said that they had had great fun watching our love-making. I rushed away from them into the garden ; I wanted to be alone, but Sir Arthur himself met

me there. I could not help bitterly reproaching him for his having so deceived me, I declared that I would never speak to him again. I would then have left him, but he caught my hands in his, looking rather amused than otherwise, as if very certain that he could persuade me to anything he pleased. Alas, he was right! He spoke so tenderly, and begged me to forgive him, because, as he said, he had so wished to be happy for a little, and he was sure I would never have cared for him if I had known he had a wife. You must not think too badly of him," Miss Vivian interrupted herself to say, speaking with warmth; "for it is true that he has great excuses, his home is so unhappy, Lady Mordaunt is such a proud disagreeable woman. He told me himself that——"

Verina interposed hurriedly:

"Do not tell me what he said about

Lady Mordaunt. It is of you, and *you only*, that I wish to hear."

Miss Vivian looked up and was forcibly struck with the paleness and sadness of her new friend's face. She continued :

" Sir Arthur went away very soon after. I knew I ought to try and forget him ; and I did try sometimes, but perhaps not very hard ; and when the invitation came for us all, I knew I ought not to accept it ; but Lady Sinclair said that it was all nonsense from beginning to end, and that if she left me at home 'people would talk.' Alas, I was not very difficult to persuade. But when, just now, Sir Arthur came to me and shook hands, he looked so delighted, and I, too, just for one moment, felt so happy again, that I saw more clearly than ever that I ought not to have come. If he once begins to talk to me I shall agree to everything he says, and forget every-

thing I ought to remember. Oh, I am so unhappy! and what *can* I do?"

Then suddenly fancying that she heard steps approaching, Miss Vivian grew very agitated, for above all things she dreaded lest her cousins, or Sir Arthur, should enter and remark the traces of her agitation.

"It is no one," said Verina soothingly; "but if you will come with me into the boudoir, we shall be more certain not to be disturbed."

She rose to lead the way, but Miss Vivian drew back in alarm.

"Will not Lady Mordaunt come there?" she asked.

"No one will come there but ourselves," answered Verina, with a faint smile.

Thus reassured, Miss Vivian now gladly acquiesced.

Aiding those who have injured them, is

to the generous, strangely sweet. This generous pleasure Verina now felt as she led her young fair rival to the refuge of her own boudoir. Besides, were not she and Miss Vivian fellow-sufferers—wounded by the same hand ? There was, therefore, nothing but pity in Verina's heart towards the young, trusting girl.

She saw Miss Vivian looked quite exhausted by her grief, so before she would allow her to continue her story she made her rest on the sofa, arranging the cushions round her with a light and tender hand, and then laid the same cool hand on the girl's burning forehead, and bathed her throbbing temples with refreshing eau de cologne. The quiet pitying tenderness of Verina's words and ways were very soothing to Miss Vivian's overwrought mood ; and for a time she was content to lie thus, watching Verina in silence.

At length she said wistfully :

“ And are you, too, unhappy ? I fancy you are.”

The white, sad look came back to Verina's face, as she answered :

“ If I were not, I could not pity you as I do ; for only those who have known sorrow can really pity sorrow.”

“ And is yours at all like mine ? Do you know what it is to love some one very much, feeling all the time that you are doing something very wrong ?”

“ No, I have never known that trial ; nevertheless I think that I can help you to be happy again if you will listen to me. Only you must first promise me, that you will never hereafter believe that what I say is prompted by anything but an earnest wish for your own happiness.”

“ Indeed, I promise that willingly. How could I ever think anything else ?”

“ I need not explain that,” replied

Verina, "but do not forget that I *am* thinking only of you."

Verina was perfectly sincere. She intended to advise Miss Vivian to combat her unfortunate attachment to Sir Arthur, but Verina knew that she herself could gain nothing by this. Sir Arthur would, she knew, amuse himself with every one who took his fancy. If it was not with Miss Vivian, it would be with some one else—with any one but herself. She continued with the grave wisdom sorrow was beginning to teach her :

"In order to be happy again, then, you should summon all your resolution, and determine to think no more of Sir Arthur Mordaunt."

"But I cannot forget him," interrupted Miss Vivian faintly.

"You have not yet really tried. Courage, only have courage. I am sure that you will, then, before long succeed in

banishing all recollection of him from your heart. It is not as if it was an attachment your conscience can approve. Then it might be different."

Verina's tone inspired her companion with an energy and hope, to which she had as yet been a stranger.

"And do you really think that I can do this—that I can ever be happy again?" she asked.

"I not only think it, I am quite sure you can, if you will but be very resolute. Endeavour to see Sir Arthur Mordaunt as little as possible, until you can meet him with indifference. All you want is resolution, I am very certain that when once you have thrown away so, forgive me, unworthy an attachment, you will rejoice to be freed from it. As I said, it is not as if it was one your conscience could approve. You already shrink from cherishing it. All this will

give you power against it. Strive then bravely and no doubt you will conquer, and be once more at peace with yourself and happy. Will you not do as I advise you in this? I am sure you cannot be happy again otherwise."

"Yes, yes, I will," she cried, with sudden energy. "You give me hope, and strength, and courage. I *will* struggle with myself, and I *will* conquer. Before you talked to me, I thought it was impossible; but I see now that it was my own irresolution which made it seem so. What good you have done me! How kind you have been to me, who have behaved so ill!"

As she spoke Miss Vivian clasped Verina's hand in hers.

Verina bent down to her and kissed her.

"Poor child," she said gently, "it is not you, but Sir Arthur who is to blame."

She was little older in years than her companion — in mind and character so much her senior, and she felt so.

“And do you not think that I had better go away to-morrow?” Miss Vivian went on.

“Yes, I think it would be best to do so. Trust Lady Sinclair for finding a plausible excuse for you, if you are resolute about going.”

As Verina spoke, the door was thrown open, and a footman in gorgeous livery, said respectfully :

“Dinner is ready, my lady.”

The man's manner and address flashed suddenly upon Miss Vivian the truth concerning her companion. She recoiled in utter horror, but the idea once hers admitted not another instant's doubt. It gave too ready a clue to little things which had puzzled her in Verina, and as she rapidly recalled Verina's manner, she

bitterly reproached herself for her incomprehensible blindness.

“Oh, how could she have been so stupid as not to have perceived that no one but Lady Mordaunt could have made herself so at home in Lady Mordaunt’s boudoir! that no one but Lady Mordaunt could have so quietly emptied Lady Mordaunt’s scent-bottle!”

This sudden conviction that it was to Lady Mordaunt herself that she had told her story, overpowered her. Verina rose, but she still sat immovable, gazing with terrified eyes at her companion.

“Are you Lady Mordaunt?” she faintly asked.

Verina bent down to her again with a sisterly caress.

“You will think me as deceiving as my husband,” she said, with her sweet, sad smile; “but I wished so much to help you that I would not tell you who I was.

Will you forgive me? But come, we must not keep the rest waiting."

So saying, with her own soft hands she smoothed Miss Vivian's disordered hair; and then, giving her no time to express the consternation which she felt, Verina led the way to the drawing-room.

The, to Verina, long evening was over. The guests had retired to their rooms; and Verina lay quietly on the sofa, in her dressing-room. She wore a long white muslin dressing-gown, which was fastened at the throat and waist by blue ribbons. Her hair was unbound and fell over her shoulders in long, bright, wavy curls, and from the spiritual face looked gravely out those quiet eyes—eyes so much too deep and quiet for one so young. As she rested thus, she looked little fitted to stand alone in life, so youthful, so gentle did she look, and so much as if she was one

who needed to be greatly cared for and cherished.

A light, quick step approached, the door was softly opened, and in another instant Miss Vivian was kneeling by the sofa. She hid her face in the folds of Verina's snowy dressing-gown, and murmured :

"Oh, Lady Mordaunt, what must you think of me! Can you, will you forgive me?"

"I do not feel that I have anything for which to forgive you," said Verina earnestly. "You were led into it in ignorance."

"You are an angel! I could not have acted as you have done. Forgive me, too, for having asked you if your grief was like mine—you, who are so pure, so angel-like!"

"Hush, hush!" said Verina hurriedly. "I have not been tempted as you have been. If I had, perhaps I should not have

been stronger. No one can tell till they are tried."

"No no; you could never have failed, as I have failed," persisted Miss Vivian. She went on: "I could not rest till I had seen you again, for I wanted to tell you that it is all gone—all my——" she hesitated—"my love, I mean, for Sir Arthur. I could not love any one who can treat you as I see he does. It revolts me from him that he could so speak of *you*, that he can so neglect *you*. Oh, Lady Mordaunt! how is it possible that he can love any one but you!"

"Do not let us speak of me—the less I speak or think of myself the better," said Verina.

Miss Vivian rose. "I must go now, or I shall be missed," she said. Then throwing her arms round Verina, she continued: "Good-night, dearest, dearest Lady Mordaunt! I can never forget you."

Then with the same quick step with which she had come, she disappeared.

With that swift step departed all Verina's quietude. She could no longer quietly lie on the sofa, but springing to her feet, she walked hastily up and down the room. Those words, "How can he love any one but you!" had awakened all the restless longing of her passionate heart; all her burning indignation against those who had first turned from her, her still idolised husband. Gentle and forgiving as Verina was by nature, and ever strove to remain, in spite of all provocation, her own strength was very weakness before emotions such as tyrannised over her now. "I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it!" she cried, and clasped her little hands in agony.

It was very vain to say this! Endure it Verina must, and there was no human friend to help or shield her.

Before she lay down to rest, Verina had resolved on one last appeal to her husband. This resolve was the only thing which had any power to calm her. "To-morrow," she thought, "I will seek him, and I will plead with him so earnestly and yet so calmly that he cannot but be moved."



CHAPTER VI.

FORTUNATELY for Miss Vivian's plans, Lady Sinclair received on the following morning an intimation from Sir Thomas, that he had been sent to his wit's end by the unexpected arrival of some relatives ; and therefore wished that either a daughter or a niece would at once return to take from him the burden of entertainment.

No better excuse for Miss Vivian's immediate departure could have been required. So warm a farewell passed between her and Verina, that Lady Catherine and her dear friend, Lady Sinclair,

looked on in astonishment. They little suspected the strange bond that united Verina and her guest.

The slight bustle of the departure was over, and the ladies were assembled in the drawing-room, and had ensconced themselves in comfortable corners, with gigantic workboxes, piles of worsteds, rolls of lace-work, and interminable gossip. They were prepared to spend a sort of morning which always made Verina feel desperate. She did not therefore linger, but at once sought her husband, intending to spend the long, quiet morning-time with him.

Many months had passed since she had thus spent the morning with him, though once it had been a matter of course that she should do so. She found Sir Arthur in the library.

Henceforth every look of everything in this library was to be stamped on Verina's memory with the startling clearness of

recollection which attaches itself even to inanimate objects, when they have been seen together with any strong emotion.

Like all the rooms in Mordaunt Hall, it was lofty and of great length. Dark crimson was the prevailing colour, and this hue, together with the long lines of oaken bookcases, gave the apartment a somewhat sombre appearance. This sombreness was relieved by the dazzling whiteness of the carved marble fireplaces, and by the large size of the bow-window, which was placed at the farthest end of the room, and surrounded by softly-cushioned settees. About the whole room there was an air of grandeur and stately comfort.

In the centre, at a table which was heaped with plans and papers, sat Sir Arthur. His present mania was for the construction of a grand new road ; and in order to find out which would be the best direction for this pet road to take, he was

at that moment engaged in considering a map of his possessions. Once he would not have been content unless Verina was seated by him, considering everything with him. Now, she had not even heard this his favourite project mentioned.

She came beside him, and laid her hand upon his shoulder. An impatient movement made her remove that little hand, and then Sir Arthur asked :

“What *do* you want ? I am busy now, so pray go away.”

A year ago he would have looked up with a smile and said that in that old sombre apartment his young, fair wife looked like a sunbeam.

“I wish to speak to you. If you cannot see me now, when will you have time to see me ? some time you must find.”

And gentle as was Verina's tone, there was in it a determination which was not to be withstood.

Sir Arthur considered for a moment, and then suddenly, and with an air of impatient resignation, threw himself back in his chair and gave an ungracious "Well?"

Verina sat down beside him, and in a grave but most gentle voice began :

"I cannot bear to let things go on any longer thus between us without seriously asking you *how* I have offended you. If you would only tell me how I have done so! I would so gladly do anything you wish!"

"Verina, you will drive me distracted," said Sir Arthur impatiently.

"Have patience with me for a little," she said with gentle entreaty. "I have so often tried to ask you this, and you would never listen to me. Oh, listen to me now, and answer me!"

"I never said I was offended with you," was the reply she at length obtained.

"Perhaps not in words, but in every

other way you have said it constantly for many months."

Sir Arthur answered sarcastically :

"You have such a fervent imagination that 'you see strange sights no one else sees, and hear strange sounds no one else hears,' as Lady Catherine told you yesterday, to your great indignation."

Verina's colour deepened, but she replied gently as ever :

"I cannot think what motive you can have, for now denying in words what in every other way you daily and ostentatiously tell me."

"I deny nothing," he said sharply.

"Then is it this that you mean—that these are the terms which you consider pleasant? and do you therefore refuse to own to this estrangement, because by owning to it you would render a change more easy?"

"I commend your ingenuity in finding motives for my actions," he said haughtily.

"Oh, if you would but be frank with me!"

"I see nothing to be frank about," Sir Arthur replied. "I see nothing so very peculiar in the terms we are on: if you would not persist in doing everything you can to provoke me, we should get on very well, like most other husbands and wives, I suppose—all I want is to be left in peace. You may amuse yourself as you like. There is Lady Sinclair—pray take her as your model. She has her little affairs and plans and excitements quite separate from Sir Thomas; and so they get on very well, and don't perpetually clash."

"And you could wish us to be like the Sinclairs? we, who so loved one another once? Arthur, it would be impossible: I trust that you are no more like Sir Thomas than I am like Lady Sinclair. It would be impossible for us to go on in that state of comfortable indifference. They only look

on one another as appendages to their mutual establishment. Lady Sinclair looks on Sir Thomas as her banker's book; Sir Thomas looks on Lady Sinclair as the lady who gives amusing parties and makes him a celebrity in spite of himself; and these are the terms you would make me believe that you desire should exist between us. But no; I cannot believe it."

"That is all very eloquent, doubtless; but if you knew a little more of the world, you would know that this letting one another alone is the great art of married life, and just what all rational people end with."

"Do you from your heart believe this? No, I am sure you do not."

"I can see nothing so very objectionable in such a relationship," he said coldly. "The Sinclairs are very friendly."

"Better enmity than such friendship!" cried Verina; "friendly, because they are

too utterly indifferent to one another to dispute!"

"How absurd," remarked Sir Arthur.

Verina checked herself, and with an abrupt transition, and a voice that was most pathetic in its gentleness, began:

"Do you never think of the past? I do, often. Do you not remember how we enjoyed our first spring-time together? and the long walks we went together through the woods? They were just bursting into leaf, as they are now. And do you recollect our finding in one of those walks that pretty wood-pigeon's nest, and the way the birch-tree showered all its raindrops over us when we pushed through the brake to examine our discovery? You said our bird's-nesting together was 'great fun,' and as we walked home, what stories you told me of your adventures when you were a boy! Do you not remember that walk?"

Sir Arthur did recollect it. He remem-

bered too the buoyant light-heartedness which he had felt, as he recalled his boyish exploits for the amusement of his young wife : but he said nothing in answer.

Verina continued :

“It was just such a day as this, that is what made me think of that especial walk. I did not think of it because it was pleasanter than most, for all things were pleasant then ; and night always came too soon. And then when summer arrived, do you remember the bivouac-place we made under the great beech, with cushions, and books, and dogs, all in most glorious confusion together ? I am sure that you were as happy then as I was ; you never look so really happy now.”

Verina paused ; but Sir Arthur remained silent, bending over his map, apparently solely occupied in tracing on it the future windings of his road. He had tried not to listen, for Verina's words and voice recalled

the past and all its peaceful happiness too vividly to give pleasure to one who had wilfully forsaken such a paradise. He did not like to remember how perfect it had been.

“If that pleasant song is forgotten, it is to be learnt
no more,
And the dim notes of that pleasant song will be
heard as a reproachful spirit.”

Such did they sound to Sir Arthur; and still Verina went on in that low, sweet, dreamy voice, recalling the pleasant past, striving thus to win him to think more gently in the present. She rather wondered at his patience in listening to her so long. Never before since his first estrangement had he done so; but now he made no attempt to interrupt her.

“And our little Evelyn,” she said at length, “it is so long since you have played with her; you have hardly seen her of late, and yet she is grown so pretty and so dear:

she is much prettier now than when she used to clap her hands at sight of you, because you gave her such glorious springs up into the air. You were so fond of her once; how you used to romp together, whilst I stood watching you in some alarm for my wee thing. Now I could not be afraid," she continued with deep feeling, "for if we three were even for one short hour together as we were then, there would be no room left in my heart for fear; it would be too full of gladness indescribable."

Emboldened by his silence, Verina continued in an accent of deep emotion :

"Oh, Arthur, think! it is almost a whole year since we were thus friends!—that is *too* terrible. I entreat you, let this day see the end of this so painful estrangement."

As Verina spoke, her heart beat tumultuously, and her low voice grew tremulous

with impassioned eagerness, for his continued silence was to her the dawning of a faint, delicious hope. She fancied it meant that he was relenting—his old love awakening; she had always trusted that it was only asleep—not dead.

“Oh, shall we not,” she continued, “from this hour forget all that has passed since then; or remember it only as a frightful dream; and be once more to one another what we were in those first most happy months?”

Fervently Verina pleaded.

At length Sir Arthur raised himself and said in a voice that was gentler than before, and not unmoved:

“Verina, this is impossible.”

“Why is it impossible?” asked Verina in an altered, saddened tone.

After pausing in vain for a reply, she said gently:

“If it was I who was cold to you, it

would not be so strange, but what have I ever done to alienate you ?”

Sir Arthur's momentary softness vanished.

“ Your eternal reproaches !” he exclaimed.

“ I did not mean it as a reproach,” she answered sorrowfully. “ Perhaps I have been to blame in ever reproaching you ; perhaps I ought to have been more patient. I believe that I have resented things too deeply ; but when I own this, and ask you to forgive me, will you not do so ?”

He replied coldly :

“ You are mistaken in supposing that I am dissatisfied with anything you may have said or done.”

The power Verina had momentarily acquired over him was already gone ! She saw this and her heart sank, for she could think of nothing more to say that could move him, and yet when she had first

entered the library, she had not appeared further from the longed-for reconciliation than she did now.

She remained silent, lost in bitter thoughts.

At length Sir Arthur broke the silence, saying :

“ I suppose that you have now said all you wish to say ; and as this is a most unprofitable conversation, I should really be much obliged to you if you would now leave me.”

Apparently nothing could have any power to move Sir Arthur from his impregnably cold reserve.

Verina rose ; but instead of leaving the room, obeying a sudden impulse, she advanced to him, and knelt down beside him, and clasped her arms around him, and laid her head upon his breast—it was so long since it had rested there.

“ Arthur, my husband, do not send me

from you thus," she pleaded. "I cannot tell *what* has come between us, to make you thus change to me ; but if it is my doing—whatever it may be—oh, forgive me for it, and take me back to you once more. I do not ask you to be again my lover, if that is not possible, I only ask you to be at least my friend. Do not shut out from your heart *quite* and for ever the wife you once so loved, and whose love for you has, in spite of all things, never faltered. Oh, listen to me and come back to me ; oh, come back to me, my husband !"

The thrillingly earnest entreaty of that gentle voice, the touch of the once cherished golden hair, waving down on his breast once more ; and, above all, the recognition thus forced upon him, of how loyally, through all neglect, the true heart had loved on, unchilled, unchanged, all moved Sir Arthur to a long-unwonted

tenderness, and a sudden self-reproach. Even his pride and selfishness faltered. Verina's unwearied love had almost conquered, almost broken down the cold barrier he had so carefully raised between them—almost—alas! only almost.

For an instant he bent forward to take her in his arms, won thus nearly to actual repentance that he could ever have forsaken his gentle, constant wife—won nearly to the renunciation of all love but hers.

Alas! at that very moment before him rose the vision of Lady Millicent. She seemed to stand before him in all her radiant beauty, with her flashing eyes and her coils of jet black hair; and over his memory stole the echoes of most melodious words a most melodious voice had whispered one autumn evening in a long alley of the Baden-Baden gardens.

He listened to those echoes, and

hardened his heart against Verina, and became again harsh and cold. He did not repulse her. That was all. No tender words answered her passionate appeal; instead of clasping her in his arms, he merely said :

“You excite yourself very unnecessarily.” And said it, too, in his most freezing tone.

The brief, cold words fell heavily on Verina’s heart, slowly she unclasped her arms from him, slowly she rose and stood in silence beside him, bitterly asking herself if no further reply would be obtained by the appeal which was the very voice of her heart crying its agonising desire.

During this brief pause Sir Arthur suddenly decided that it would after all be best that they should come to a mutual understanding. Already he had of late sometimes thought that it was unwise any longer to refuse to Verina the explanation

she had frequently desired. He thought that if she would not be content with the intimations which he had given her, by actions and by manner, that it might really be best to let her know the true state of things by words—to tell her he really had *no* love for her, and that she must therefore learn to stand alone, and no longer make her happiness depend in any way on him. He considered that if she chose, she might still be very happy. Was not every avenue to pleasure and distinction open to her? She might make herself the leader in all the gaiety and dissipation of Berkshire—become the very queen of the neighbourhood; for was she not young and rich, and beautiful? What higher aim of ambition could a woman desire?

He gave her, as his wife, as lofty a position as she need wish; she always had as much money as she chose—what more could a woman want? Could she not, like

other ladies, take up and gratify a thousand fancies, tiny dogs—jewellery—beautiful dresses—the adulation of others? In short, was not everything in her power? And yet she would not be content! He had always thought this very unreasonable.

In justice to Sir Arthur it must be said that he had no conception of what Verina's feelings really were. He was of a colder nature, and as people always believe that every one feels as much and no more than they themselves do, Sir Arthur very naturally concluded, that if Verina chose, she could be as contented with his indifference, as he could be with hers. Of affection, intense and all-absorbing, such as it was Verina's unhappy fate to love with, he really had no idea. He believed indeed that she was very fond of him; well, so had he been of her once, and now he could feel very happy without her,

therefore no doubt if she liked she could be very happy without him. That she would not be so, he considered provoking, unreasonable, and perverse.

Such during the whole interview had been the undercurrent of Sir Arthur's thoughts; and now the remembrance of his momentary "weakness" provoking him both with himself and with Verina, he determined to lay all these considerations plainly before her. Even if in so doing he did give her a little pain, that was better than his being always tormented like this.

He therefore said :

"It will be better for both of us if we come to an understanding. You asked me why it was impossible that we should ever again be to one another what we were at first. I will now tell you the reason, and though what I am going to say will sound harsh, it is no real kindness not at once to

tell you the truth—in fact, you yourself force me to do so. In short, then, I have discovered that it was a delusion or illusion, whichever you like, that made me marry you. The illusion has now vanished, and I am forced to see that we are utterly unsuited to one another; and that our marriage was a great mistake. The past can not be recalled, therefore all that there remains for us is to make the best we can of this our great mistake. My part I know. You do not appear to see yours, which is simply this—not to expect me to idolise you, but to make yourself contented in what many would, with reason, consider an enviable position. Everything that wealth can procure will always be yours; every amusement also is in your power; you can acquire the lead in everything that goes on, as Lady Catherine did before you, if you choose, for it is no wish of mine, but your own negligence, which has

allowed Lady Catherine hitherto to rule everything. You are clever enough, and very good-looking, so you might obtain a 'great success.' You will, too, always find me ready to grant any reasonable wish, and to treat you with all the consideration due to you as my wife. Beyond that expect nothing from me, for when you ask me for affection you ask me for what I really cannot give you, for I cannot pretend to feelings which I no longer possess. I regret this, and that I am obliged to say it, but as I before said, it is no true kindness to conceal from you that my feelings towards you are completely changed."

Sir Arthur might have said all this in fewer words. "You may have everything except the only thing you prize," would have fully expressed his meaning.

He had spoken very calmly and very forcibly. He was glad to have the opportunity to put the case so clearly before her.

Her quiet silence a little surprised him ; and he judged from it that, after all, she had not been so very unhappy about him. Sir Arthur had no idea of a grief past words or tears.

Quietly she stood there beside him, gazing with uplifted face through the great bow-window at the scene without. There lay the undulating park and the long lines of woods, just bursting into leaf, clad in their tenderest green, and backed by piles of drifting gloomy clouds, against which the tender green stood out in startling contrast ; whilst over the undulating park fled the swift shadows of still denser clouds.

Ah ! and dark as those clouds looked to the widowed wife her fate ! In silence, but with grief unspeakable in her deep eyes — eyes that looked now such wells of unwept tears—she gazed upon the black sky and tender woods. Fit emblems were

they of the changeful April—fit emblems, also, of her youth and her despair.

A flight of rooks flew cawing past the window. No other sound broke the stillness that reigned without ; and within no sounds were heard but the loud ticking of the clock, or the occasional downward plunge of a burning log on the wide and blazing hearth.

There was no human eye to witness the tragedy which was passing in that quiet room ; and even had any one entered, it would not have struck him that anything particular had passed. He would have only beheld a stately apartment, and in its centre a gentleman, calmly bending over maps which lay on the table before him, whilst beside him stood a lady, clad in a deep blue silken dress, which fell in graceful folds, and suited well with the delicate transparency of her complexion, and vied in hue with her large, soft eyes. Perhaps

he might have been struck by the heart-rent anguish in those eyes; perhaps he would have only thought that she was carelessly regarding the cawing rooks—so quietly, so imperceptibly pass the tragedies of our lives.

At length Verina spoke.

“Do you really mean that you have *no* affection for me left; and that, at this moment and henceforth, you can never feel anything but *indifference* towards me?”

“It is peculiar that you should have so much pleasure in hearing me say so, that you wish me to repeat it—yes, that is what I mean.”

Then at length there came a burst of agony.

“Oh, unsay what you have said! oh, Arthur, have pity on me!”

“It is your own doing,” he answered moodily.

To her face there came the colour and

the light, not of anger—though Sir Arthur chose to consider it so — but of a great emotion.

“Arthur, it is in *no* way my doing,” she cried.

“This display of ill-temper is not very likely to make my feelings towards you change again,” he said with impatience.

She rung her hands in agony.

“Oh, what can I do, what can I say, that will make you understand me?—*angry*, you call me! I, who am only imploring you to love me! is that the language of anger? This is all the effect my words have upon you! Oh, what can I say!”

“My dear Verina,” he answered coldly, “I perfectly comprehend you. You are nervous and excitable, and see things in an exaggerated light. There is nothing really so very terrible in what I have said; but you have such girlish, romantic notions; such a very vivid imagination.”

He laughed slightly as he spoke. He was quite sincere. He really believed Verina's emotion to be nothing but nervous excitement; and in doing so he thought as most people do think, at the sight of any stronger feeling than they have themselves experienced. They cannot believe in its reality. Thrilling words and burning tears are to them but the poetical garb in which, for effect, are wrapped feelings cold as their own.

Sir Arthur, therefore, concluded with :

“ You should try and gain a more healthy tone of mind. Try and look at things calmly; for excuse me, but really in these exaggerated feelings of yours there is a great deal of contemptible weakness.”

With a low cry of exceeding pain, Verina sank down into her seat, and covered her face with her hands. “ It is all in vain,” she thought; “ nothing can move him; nothing can make him understand

me ; nothing can ever make him love me again, so I will give it all up—I will never try any more.”

For many minutes she did not move or speak. At length she uncovered her face. It was grown so white and still, and the low voice in which she spoke had lost its passionate entreaty, and sounded clear and cold as the distant note of a bird through frosty midnight air.

“I wonder,” said this low, strange voice, “whether, when in old days the executioners racked their victims, I wonder if they, at the same time, laughed at them for being so weak as to feel any pain ! May you, Arthur, never know what it is to be mocked at and misunderstood in your deepest, most passionate distress !”

It was as if a cold, passionless spirit had suddenly taken the impulsive Verina's place ; and in spite of himself Sir Arthur was thrilled by the strange, calm intensity

in the low voice, and in the pale, beautiful countenance.

As no tears, no impassioned cry for love or pity had ever had power to move him, this strange, calm intensity moved him now. The former was, he knew, "romantic excitability and ill-temper;" this sudden calmness he could not understand. He could not see that it was the calm of a great hopelessness. For an instant he felt uncomfortable, for an instant only; then he answered quickly and impatiently :

"This is all very fine acting, but as I am no longer the fool I was at Rüdenheim, it wearies me exceedingly."

Verina rose up with a stately grace.

"It is the last time I will so weary you. Henceforth go your own way where you will, I will trouble you no more."

Then, with the same proud sadness, she clasped him in a tender embrace, and as she released him, she said gently :

“Forgive me this kiss, my husband, for it is my last.”

Then slowly, and as in a dream, she left him and passed along the corridor to Evelyn’s room.



CHAPTER VII.

EVELYN was alone. She was sitting on the floor, rosy with merriment, and laughing a low, murmuring laugh as, again and again, an enormous ball escaped from the grasp of her tiny hands.

Verina raised her in her arms, and with a scream of merry pleasure she clasped her little arms round her mother's neck.

The touch of those tiny hands and the sound of that childish voice softened Verina's mood to one which was more natural, and therefore less alarming. She burst into tears, and pressing Evelyn

closer to her, sobbed in passionate words which the child could not comprehend, that henceforth she would live only for her, care for nothing else, think of nothing else, give up all vain, feverish resistance, and let all things and every one go their own way, unheeded by her.

She carried Evelyn away with her to her own sitting-room. She could not bear the child to leave her for an instant ; she felt as if her presence only could have any power to enable her to bear the grief she suffered. As long as Evelyn would sit in her lap, and prattle her broken words, in her pretty, eager fashion, the pain at Verina's heart felt soothed and for a time stilled ; but when Evelyn was silent, or slid down from her knee and away exploring, the agony of remembrance which came over Verina quite terrified her, and she would entice Evelyn back again to her side, and ask her all sorts of questions merely that she might

hear the little, sweet voice which had over her such soothing power.

Thus passed the afternoon of this, to Verina, most memorable day. It was piteous how she clung to that child; even when Evelyn's nurse came to carry her off to her tea, Verina would not part with her; and so, to Evelyn's extreme delight, tea was brought into the boudoir, and she partook of it sitting in her mother's lap. And then, after tea, being rather weary with play, she was now quite content to remain quietly nestling closer in Verina's arms, little thinking what consolation she thus gave to her young, desolate mother. Even, too, when bedtime came, it was Verina who carried her to her room; and when she was laid in her pretty cot, Verina again surprised the nurse by telling her she might leave the room, for that she herself would remain with the child.

"But, my lady, excuse me for reminding

you that the gong will sound in a few minutes," said the good woman, and as she spoke she looked with surprise at Verina's morning-dress. Her wonder was not decreased when Verina replied that she did not intend returning to the drawing-room that evening.

The nurse went away, and Verina sat down beside her sleeping child; bending over her, she lightly kissed the rosy cheek, and whispered: "I have you still, my darling." Then she rose, and with careful hands she screened the light away from the little face, and then sat down again beside the cot.

Hour after hour passed, and still Verina sat there lost in deep and painful thought. Those long hours were an era in Verina's life; for in them she said adieu for ever to her former self; in them calmly and resolutely she put quite away from her the sweet expectation so long, in spite of all

things, cherished, that this estrangement could not always endure, and that, after all, it would be by her husband's side, and beneath the shelter of his love, that her future years would pass.

It was no painless task thus to resign her idolised Arthur, her first and only love; but she now fully recognised that thus it must be. She knew him too well to doubt the sincerity of his explicit declaration that his love for her had been only a passing fancy—a fancy which was gone never to return. She only wondered how she could so long have blinded herself, in any degree, to what now appeared so self-evident a truth.

Alas! why had Sir Arthur gathered the fragrant wild flower, merely that he might carry it for a little while in his bosom, and then tire of it and fling it down remorselessly in the dusty highway! there to meet what fate it might—to wither and die, or to be

borne hither and thither by the cold winds ; but never to return to its parent stem, beneath the broad, shady leaves, where it was visited by fireflies and dainty moths, and where it spread out its sweet petals so gladly in the warm sunshine ! That could never be !

From the long, happy dream of her girlhood he had awakened Verina. He had taught her to know the fullest bliss of womanhood. Now, weary of her, he cast her aside ; but he could not give her back that which she had resigned for the delusive happiness he had offered—he could not give her back her sunny dream-life, her unclouded heart. It was not possible that she could fancy her short felicity a vision, and return to all her old ways—her happy reveries—and be once more careless alike of the present, or the future, or the past. She had drunk of a deeper cup of life. The old, simple draught was tasteless to her now.

Yes, it *was* past — past for ever — the brief enchantment of her youth ; and before her, stripped of all its illusive, rainbow light of boundless hopes, of aspirations and of golden reveries, life now arose a stern and barren reality, with none to share it with her. The discovery that they are suddenly shelterless in the wide world, with none on whom to lean, brings with it, to the young and tender, a strange sensation.

It is a sense of awe—a sense as though they were walking in the dark, close beside a deep, unguarded river ! So it was with Verina. But she also felt as if, hitherto, she had all her nineteen years been wrapped in a long sweet summer dream, and that now, as she prepared to brace every nerve and every energy for the encounter with the dark and silent future, she for the first time really lived.

Through all her pain, she even then dimly recognised that such a manful com-

bat was a far nobler life than one of dreamful ease. In those long hours a strange strength came to her—that strength which trial often brings even to the tenderest.

Thus, instead of fainting before the gloomy future, Verina's spirit rose proudly to meet it; and if she had been asked, "What remains?" as Medea was when she had lost everything, Verina too would have replied with proud courage that "*she herself*" remained.

Nevertheless, it was through burning tears that before she retired to rest she read the following lines :

"If I should see thee turn away,
And know that prayer and time and pain
Could no more thy lost love regain,
Than bid the hours of dying day
Gleam in their mid-day noon again.

"If I should loose thy hand and know
That henceforth we must dwell apart,
Since I had seen thy love depart,
And only count the hours' flow
By the dull throbbing of my heart;

"All truth and honour then would seem
Vain clouds, which the first wind blew by ;
All truth—a folly doomed to die ;
All life—an empty, useless dream ;
All love—since thine had failed—a lie."

That the little book in which she read this had been given her by her Arthur, perhaps caused her tears to fall even faster on the mournful words than they would otherwise have done. He had given it to her in early days ; not because he admired the poems, but only because he thought they would please Verina. He cared to please her then.

Bitter as were those fast-falling tears, they were the last that she would shed for the glad, vanished days. Henceforth she would be strong.



CHAPTER VIII.

THIS resolve Verina maintained ; and with resolution strange in one so young and inexperienced, she strove to put away from her all vain regret, all brooding grief. It was the "mother's love" that gave her the will and the power to do this ; for her child's sake she would live, and calmly live.

From this time a great change came over her. She was no longer a sensitive, impassioned, impulsive girl. She seemed suddenly to have arisen far above her old self ; and far above the power of any one to provoke or grieve her. A grave stateliness

now marked her intercourse with others; and she now repelled with determination and proud dignity the contemptuous familiarity with which even the guests had been wont to treat her. With the hope to win back her husband's love, departed also all anxiety, all timidity. She no longer shrank before any one. On the contrary, even Lady Catherine soon discovered that Verina had now taken up her own ground, and would maintain it with a resolute calm which was not to be gainsaid.

She now seemed as unconscious of Sir Arthur's existence as he had long appeared of hers, except when she forced him to notice her. Now, never did she do so. No longer did she seize every opportunity of being with him, every possible pretext for claiming his attention. Never again did the tears rush to her eyes when he coldly rejected her proffered aid in any of his occupations, or refused a solicited confidence,

for never now did she offer her aid, or ask his confidence. She never sought him, never addressed him, except when obliged to do so; and no soft, tearful appeal ever again passed her lips or pleaded in her dark eyes. She seldom even looked at him; and when she did, there was no trace in those dark eyes of their once imploring wistfulness.

This marked change in her manner appeared, strange to say, rather to pique Sir Arthur, and to make him determine to force her to break her proud resolve; for at first he was more than usually ostentatious of his affection for Lydia and his indifference towards herself; and he evidently rather watched for the effect this would have on Verina. Never before could she have looked on unmoved. Now, however, though once or twice she grew paler, she maintained her lofty reserve unbroken—even by a look. She would kneel at his feet in vain no more.

Henceforth, Verina retired to her own suite of rooms, and mingled very little in the life of the rest of the family. In this retirement she occupied herself with her child—her now constant companion ; and sought in various pursuits to find tranquillity and forgetfulness. As much as was possible she returned to her old ways ; and busied herself with her long-neglected art, and with books of every kind, and gave herself up once more to the simple pleasures of her girlhood—to her old love of nature, of flowers, and of poetry. In these quiet occupations she found at least the tranquillity she sought.

This new arrangement was a great source of delight to little Evelyn. She was full of importance and merriment at being now allowed to remain almost all day with her mother, instead of, as formerly, seeing her only at brief intervals.

Inexpressible triumph filled Lady Ca-

therine's heart when she perceived that Verina had thus, at length, completely withdrawn from the long and desperate combat, leaving her undisputed mistress of the field. As long as they were alone at Mordaunt Hall, she had not the slightest inclination to interrupt Verina's solitary life; but when any guests assembled there, she would not allow Verina to absent herself entirely from the visitors and from the gaieties that then went on. She did not choose to incur the odium of being supposed to remain at Mordaunt Hall in opposition to Verina's wishes; the tacit consent of Verina's presence was necessary to her. Moreover, she did not wish Verina to receive the sympathy that any evident neglect could not but, in the end, arouse. It was always easy for her to accomplish her purposes through her son. He was willing enough to impose on Verina any commands Lady Catherine desired, and Verina never at-

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tempted on any subject to dispute his authority. Therefore, whenever Mordaunt Hall became a scene of dissipation, Verina had, like a captive of old, to grace her enemy's triumph. But even then, whenever it was possible she would seek the peace of her retirement ; and she would fortify herself for a long weary evening by more than one stolen visit to Evelyn's bedside. Evelyn became the anchor of her life, her idol, as Evelyn's father once had been.



CHAPTER IX.

YEARS are passed. Five anniversaries are come and gone, of the day on which Verina, then a girl of nineteen, vowed, in her passionate despair, henceforth to live for her child only. During these five years Herr Maringen had died, apparently carrying with him into his grave the mystery of his strange life. He and Verina had never met again. She had once expressed a wish to revisit her old home. Sir Arthur had refused his consent so abruptly and positively that Verina had never repeated the proposal. And indeed, in spite of the

longing for the old home scenes that sometimes came over her, she herself half shrank from letting those who had known her in her happy early years see how changed she had become. Time had worked no beneficial change in Sir Arthur Mordaunt's temper or character. On the contrary, he seemed every year to become more harsh, and worldly, and hard. This was a natural consequence of the sort of life he led. No man can, however, quite silence his conscience, and though Sir Arthur never attended to any of its suggestions, it was impossible for him to live as he did—in defiant disregard of all that is just and righteous—and be at peace with himself. This occasional disquiet did not tend to improve his naturally imperious and violent temper.

That there was no son and heir at Mordaunt Hall, was still a sore point with all the family; but especially with Sir

Arthur. It was become to him a great and irritating disappointment. He could not, now, endure the thought that with himself the long line of Mordaunts of Mordaunt Hall must end ; and even his possessions must pass away to a distantly related, unknown family, who bore a different name. Evelyn could inherit nothing.

So impatient was Sir Arthur on this point, that he had grown quite to dislike little Evelyn, because she was not a boy. Neither with her grandmother nor her aunts had she found greater favour. She was too like her mother for that. She possessed the same fair hair, the same deep blue, dreamy eyes, gleaming beneath lashes long and dark as Verina's, the same poetical temperament, and all the sunny vivacity that had once characterised her mother. But what could little Evelyn care for any cold looks? how could

she need the love of others, she who was the absorbing idol of her mother's heart? No frowns could reach her through the sunshine that mother's love cast round her, so she grew up as bright, as gay, as full of unclouded happiness, as though she was the pet and plaything of all. Verina took further care to ensure this, by keeping her as much as possible from every collision with the rest. Therefore Evelyn seldom saw her father, or her aunts, or her grandmother; and her young life caught none of the gloom their indifference would have cast upon it.

She was, in truth, a most engaging child, intelligent far beyond her years, and lovely as she was intelligent; with all the airy grace of motion of a young fawn, with the sweetest of voices and the most melodious of merry laughs. To see her flitting over the lawn among the flower-beds, her long curls streaming

behind her, her blue eyes beaming, and her sweet, merry little voice singing gaily, was indeed a sight to rejoice even the saddest mother's heart.

It was now an established rule—a matter of course—that Lady Catherine should virtually be the mistress at Mordaunt Hall. It was to her that the servants looked for orders; she it was who arranged and settled everything; she who invited whom she would, and gave parties when and how she would. Verina never attempted nor wished to attempt the slightest interference. That she should take no part in the parties that went on, and scarcely know even the names, or the arrival, or the departure of the frequent visitors, was also, now, the natural order of things.

Another established rule was, that Sir Arthur should never notice his wife, unless to vent on her his ill-temper. If he at

other times thought of her at all, it was only to say to himself that she was grown very dull and plain. This was a great mistake on Sir Arthur's part.

After a residence of many years abroad the Astons had lately returned to Aston Castle. Lady Millicent was beautiful and entertaining as ever, and Sir Arthur's passion for her had revived and appeared as vehement as of old. She returned it fully, and it was whispered that it was for his sake that she remained unmarried, pertinaciously refusing the most brilliant offers. It was also whispered—and this whisper had reached Verina—that Lady Millicent and Sir Arthur had been heard to comment with satisfaction on his wife's pale looks.

Lady Aston was dead, and Lord Aston, a good-natured and easy man, did not feel himself at all called upon to interfere in any of his daughter's amusements; the

sole notice he took of her proceedings was to jest very gaily with her about Sir Arthur Mordaunt's enthusiasm for the beauty of the road which led from Mordaunt Hall to Lady Millicent's boudoir.

Calmly and gravely Verina bore herself through all, submitting to all things with a calm, proud resignation ; reserved and friendless, but no longer a child in her ignorance of the world and life. She did not often smile, except when alone in her own sitting-room, with Evelyn ; but when thus alone, especially if Evelyn laughed and clapped her little hands in merriment, or sat on her mother's lap, recounting long histories about her pets, or listening to the stories with which Gretchen had charmed Verina's own childhood, in spite of all things, Verina was really happy—then and then only.

So changed were all things now, that

her former light heart and careless existence came before her as a dimly remembered dream. It seemed to her as if between her and her early life in Rüdiseim, a deep gulf lay; as if ages and ages had rolled by since she had lived there a light-hearted, mirthful girl. She could scarcely believe that she had ever been other than the grave and silent Lady Mordaunt; could scarcely credit, that she was once an idolised and happy wife. Sometimes she would look at Sir Arthur, and listen to his harsh tones, almost doubting that it could be true that she used to go confidingly to him, and lay her head upon his shoulder and tell him all her thoughts and wishes: or that he had ever pressed her to his heart, and called her "his own Lina," "his treasure," in tones of such musical tenderness, that even the remembrance of them would thrill Verina's heart as once used those

tones themselves. She was little likely to hear them again, for now she had none of the gaiety, none of the bright sayings, the beaming looks which had at first attracted him.

Appearances and the opinion of the world were still so much respected at Mordaunt Hall, that few suspected the true state of affairs. It was so easy for Lady Catherine satisfactorily to account for her daughter-in-law's gravity and frequent absence from what went on, by significantly calling her "fanciful" and "peculiar." Sir Arthur was still spoken of as an indulgent and attentive husband, and many censured Lady Mordaunt severely for the coldness of her manner towards this praiseworthy husband, and expressed compassion for him, as being thus deprived, by her wayward temper, of the blessing of a happy domestic life.

None knew how Lady Mordaunt's heart

rebelled against accepting from him, in public, for appearance' sake, attentions which—slight as they were—were never offered to her except in public. None knew how long and earnestly, and with what grief she once had striven against Sir Arthur's resolve, to impose between them the most distant terms—these very terms, as the author of which she was now universally condemned ! None knew how once she had knelt before him, imploring him not to thus forsake her.

So Sir Arthur was pitied, and Lady Mordaunt blamed. That she was so condemned added a pang the more to her lot, for no one can be indifferent to the universal reprobation of others ; the very fact of its being unmerited makes it hardest to bear.

During the years which had elapsed since that memorable April day, Sir Arthur had occasionally gone abroad alone, and the whole family had passed several

seasons in London, and paid many visits to the Mordaunts' various friends.

A season in London Verina disliked and dreaded. In a London, house it was impossible to escape, as she could at Mordaunt Hall, from much that went on, in the way of parties and society. And to her, whose tastes were so different, and who had been forced so early to say adieu to the light heart of youth, it was all so wearisome ; the commonplace conversation, the rare bits of scandal, the descriptions of dress and jewellery, the coquetries and flirtations, and frivolous amusements, the subjects forming the staple of the words and ideas of the Mordaunts and their friends, being as uninteresting to her as ever.

They went out a great deal ; but through all gaieties, all dissipation, Verina passed with the same passive weariness, courteous, indeed, to all, but cordial to none ; saying

all that was necessary, doing all that was expected; but neither doing nor saying anything more than necessity obliged her. She sought no friendship, asked no sympathy, for she felt that to no friend of any Mordaunt could she grant *her* friendship.

And none sought to know or to befriend the strange, cold Lady Mordaunt, whose "pride," and whose "sublimity," as they called it, were a favourite jest among her sisters-in-law and their friends. Every one declared that they could not understand her. "She was very odd," they said; but they supposed these ways of hers were the usual strange ways of the "obscure and secluded foreign village" from which (according to Lady Catherine) she came. And at length all agreed, that lovely as she might be, there was "really nothing in her," that she was "perfectly inanimate," and never "either thought of anything, or

felt anything ;" that she was, in short, "nothing but a beautiful statue." Her beauty, at least, no one but Sir Arthur denied. In truth, she was lovelier than ever. The quiet, mournfulness of her large soft eyes, the delicate transparency of her complexion, and the stately grace of her slightest movement, giving her a peculiar beauty, which made her, wherever she went, the theme of remarks. But all expressions of admiration were generally terminated by exclamations of "But what a pity Lady Mordaunt looks so like a spirit!" "If she would only come to life." Those who thus spoke did not know that the calm which looked like inanimation, was the result of the unfaltering, resolute control with which was held in check a most impassioned nature. Yet those serene unfathomable eyes might have betrayed her to any keen perception. There was a look in them, as if they had

scanned the very heights and depths of life, of gladness, and of grief ; and out of their glowing depths there sometimes flashed a light that made even the most careless observer for a moment doubt whether the quiet Lady Mordaunt was really as impassive as she appeared.



CHAPTER X.

NEVER had Verina been again alone with Sir Arthur at Mordaunt Hall. He evidently avoided this. Perhaps he dimly felt that his conscience might awaken unpleasantly if he remained alone with his wife, seeing daily no other face than that one, which was so pale and altered. Perhaps he only thought that a *tête-à-tête* existence with Verina would be a bore and disagreeable.

Whatever might be the reasons which influenced him, he never failed to act on them. If Lady Catherine and her daughters went away, he also left. These

were Verina's happiest times. She felt as if she could breathe freer when they were all gone; as if a heavy weight was lifted off her when silence and solitude reigned in the now deserted Hall. Then she would no longer confine herself to her own apartments, but would once more take possession of the great, beautiful drawing-room; and once more establish herself with her books, her drawings, and her flowers, in her favourite rooms, like she used in the days when Sir Arthur sat beside her, and smiled upon his young bride.

Evelyn delighted in this variation of their quiet life. It was quite glorious to her to be able to explore all over the house and drawing rooms, without the chance of encountering her father or her grandmother, and being reproved by them for everything she said or did, and seeing her mother look, in consequence, vexed and anxious. Besides,

when all were away, if it were summer-time, she might have her tea brought out of an afternoon under the wide-spreading cedar, which grew near the terrace, and this was a great treat to Evelyn. It was not perfect, however, unless Verina sat by the open drawing-room window, watching her, and smiling to her occasionally.

On one such summer evening Evelyn sprang suddenly into the drawing-room, through the open window. Verina was sitting by it, and had just been gazing after her child, as she bounded about the garden, with her fair uncovered hair blown back from her rosy face by the evening breeze.

"I have had quite play enough, and now I am going to sit in your lap, and you are going to tell me a story," announced little Evelyn with merry assurance.

So saying, she sprang into Verina's arms. Verina smiled down upon her and asked what the story was to be about.

“Shall it be quite a true one?” she asked. “Yes, you say? Well, then, it shall be about a little girl, who was very like you, and quite as fond of stories as you. But she did not live in a place that was at all like this; she lived in a foreign country far away from here, in a strange, dark house, where there were all sorts of mysterious steps that seemed to lead nowhere, and dark closets, and dim uninhabited rooms—just the sort of place you would have delighted in. And, instead of looking out on a garden like this, the house looked down upon a broad, beautiful river.

“The little girl was never tired of gazing at this river. There was always something to be seen on it. Sometimes it was crowded by little, fleet boats with snow-white sails; sometimes by heavy dark barges that moved along slowly, as if they were quite tired. And even when

there were no boats or barges, the river itself was to her an entrancing sight ; for it was so beautiful to see how the waves broke into silver sparkling ripples, and how the broad surface reflected the faintest clouds ; and she also so loved to hear the rippling of the water on the pebbly beach, or the quiet way it washed in and out and around the great reeds which grew by the margin : that was such sweet music to her.

“She never had any play-fellows except two twin-brothers. They were older than she was, and did not often come to stay with her ; but they were very fond of her, and when the three children were together they were as merry as could be. One of their amusements was to imagine that an island, which lay in the river some way down beyond their town, belonged to them. Wonderful tales they told one another of all that they did in their island, and of

all the marvellous things that were to be seen in it; but all these adventures and marvellous productions were solely imaginary. They had never really been on the island.

“One day, however, after they had been talking a great deal about it, one of the boys exclaimed:

“‘Let us go to our island; here are boats enough lying on the beach. This little one is just big enough for us three, so let us get in and row down the river. The tide is for us; we shall soon be there.’

“‘Agreed,’ cried the others readily; so the two boys pushed the boat into the water. The little girl sprang in, and took hold of the rudder. The boys seized the oars and away they went, the little boat gliding along so swiftly, the bright blue waters flashing round it so gaily.

“They soon reached the island. It was

not very large, but no one lived there, or ever came there, so they had it all to themselves, and they determined to spend in it the whole afternoon. It was very thickly wooded, principally with willow trees. These willow trees grew especially thick, and especially close together by the water's edge, so that no one on either shore could see the interior of the island, or watch the children, and anything they did. It was all so still, so solitary, and so private, and that was just what delighted the children.

“After they had thoroughly explored their domain, the first thing they did was to build themselves a bower, or a ‘house,’ as they called it. It was spring-time. The whole island was full of the bluest bluebells, and whilst the two boys cut down boughs for the house; the little girl made a beautiful wreath of bluebells, and then put it on her head as if it was a crown,

because the boys said she was their queen.

“When the house was finished, they declared it to be the most beautiful little house that ever was built ; it was, the boys said, even good enough for their queen ; they meant that for the highest praise which could be given. It really was a very pretty place with its leafy walls and roof, and carpet of moss. As they reclined on this carpet of moss, resting very happily, what should they see but the golden bill and white plumage of a little duck moving among the rushes that grew in the water, like a thick belt round the island. It was close to them, but did not see them. Presently another and another little white duck appeared ; and they were all dabbling with their yellow bills in the bright water among the rushes. They looked so pretty that the children were delighted, but what

was their enchantment when a troop of little golden balls came floating along after one very stately duck! They were her children, and very proud of them she looked. One of the boys wished to try and catch one; but his brother and the little girl would not let him, for they did not like the pretty things to be frightened. Instead, they tried to entice the ducks to eat crumbs of bread out of their hands. They were rather shy at first, but came gradually nearer, and soon would eat out of the little girl's hand as much as she liked to give them; but they would have nothing to do with the boys. You may think how proud the little girl was of this, and the boys were too fond of her to be at all jealous of anything she did. They always liked to make her the first in everything, to give her everything; and whatever she did or said, they always thought quite perfect.

“In the very centre of the island there was a long strip of soft, even turf. No trees grew here in this sunny glade; and it looked just as if it had been cleared out and turfed expressly for the children to run races in it—so run races they did, amidst great merriment, till they were tired, and always when it was the little queen who won, the two boys were as delighted as if it had been themselves. The racing being over, they retired to their bower to rest. The boys had already collected some turf-sods and handfuls of moss, and made of this a luxurious throne for the little girl. So now she sat on her throne, and they lay at her feet on the soft moss, and told her long and marvellous tales of the adventures they would have, and the great things they would do when they were men. They did not tell these stories as fun, but in sober earnest; and not one of the

three but was quite absorbed in the recital, and fully believed that it would all take place.

“At length they said they wished the little girl would tell *them* a story. So she began. Hers was not about her own adventures, but about the people who lived far down in the blue waters, at the bottom of the river. They were not great river-people with fishy tales, but the loveliest little fairies, with wings that shimmered as they moved, a thousand colours. The little girl described the beautiful palaces in which they lived, and which were of immense extent. They were built of the purest crystal, and so transparent were they that the fairies needed only to look up at the domes of their halls, and then they could see the blue waves splashing against their palace; and could see the fish swimming above them; and the water-

plants waving their long leaves slowly to and fro. And then she described the happy life the fairies spent down there. in their river halls, and how they ran races from boulder to boulder and played at hide-and-seek among the great mussel shells."

Throughout, Evelyn had listened with intense interest, and now as Verina paused she asked :

"Does the little girl still live in her island ?"

"Oh no," replied Verina. "She grew up, and one day a tall and handsome Englishman came to her strange dark house, and when he returned to his own country, he carried her away with him."

As her father was the tallest and handsomest gentleman Evelyn had ever seen, she further inquired :

"Was the gentleman like papa ?"

"Yes, very like him," said Verina.

"And was the lady like you, mamma?"
went on the unsuspecting child.

"No, not at all like me—but where do you think he brought her? Why, to this very house."

"Oh! did he really, really?" cried Evelyn in great delight at so singular a coincidence.

"Yes, and they were so happy here together, far happier than she had ever been even on the pleasant island; and many a time she has stood at this very window watching for his home-coming, and when he came up the avenue near enough to catch sight of her, his face would always so light up with pleasure. If by any accident she was not watching for him, he would never rest till he had found her, and he would look quite grieved to have missed even for a little her glad welcome."

"Did she really like him better than those nice boys?" asked Evelyn doubtfully.

"Oh yes, a hundred thousand times!"

"And where is she now? Why did she go away from here?"

"Ah, the story says nothing about that."

"No, but tell me—tell me."

"Dearest, be reasonable. The story ends there," repeated Verina, with a smile.

Evelyn could not but admit that if the story really did end there, it was not possible for any one to know anything further about the lady and the tall handsome gentleman. Still she looked puzzled and thoughtful, and from that time she cherished a secret conviction that they must still be somewhere in Mordaunt Hall; in which belief she was not far wrong.

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Such was the life Verina had led for five long years, and a life strangely self-contained and lonely was it, for one still so young.



CHAPTER. XI.

LONG walks would Verina and her child take quietly alone together, whilst every one else at Mor-daunt Hall was pleasure and excitement seeking. One afternoon in the early summer they were returning home across the park, Evelyn carrying a basketful of wild flowers. Suddenly two riders appeared at a little distance from them, and rode slowly by. One was Lady Milli-cent; her eyes were downcast, but there was triumph in her slight smile; and the gentleman who rode beside her, resting his hand familiarly on her horse's neck—

so close they rode together—was bending down to his companion, and speaking in low, thrillingly tender tones, the same that long ago had sought and won Verina's heart. It was Sir Arthur who thus spoke. He did not see his wife, nor did Lady Millicent; they were too engrossed in their conversation to observe anything. Calmly they rode past her.

"Mamma, mamma," cried little Evelyn, "why do you not answer me? Why do you look so white?"

"What was it you said, darling?" asked Verina, her voice faltering in spite of herself.

Evelyn carefully opened her clasped hands and displayed with eager pride a tiny green and gold beetle.

"I asked you if it was not pretty, and you did not answer me," she said, a little indignant at such unusual inattention.

Even then Verina did not answer her;

she only bent down and kissed her with a tremulous tenderness. "Evelyn, you are my *one* treasure," she said.

With great wondering eyes, Evelyn looked up at her mother; she saw, then, that something was amiss—what it was she could not think, for she had only seen her father and a lady ride by! but because of that unknown something she put her little beetle down again on the grass, and in silence clasped her mother's hand tightly in hers, resting her soft cheek lovingly against it. She did not care for anything now, but to try and comfort that mother in her childish way.

That evening there was to be a grand dinner-party. Evelyn sat, as usual, at her mother's feet whilst she dressed; but instead of, as usual, chatting gaily, she was silent, and leant her head wearily against her mother's knee, and Verina remarked that she looked strangely flushed.

"Are you tired, my child?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, I am tired—*so* tired," was now Evelyn's piteous complaint. In alarm, for which she vainly reproved herself, Verina rose, though her hair was still falling unbound around her, and raised Evelyn in her arms, and carried her to her own rooms, and till she was laid in her welcome bed, Verina would not leave her, in spite of the warning bells. To be late was still a great offence; but just then Verina cared for nothing but Evelyn's heavy, tired look. It was so unusual for her to complain of fatigue, and they had been so short a distance.

"Send and tell me when Miss Evelyn goes to sleep," said Verina anxiously, as she left her.

It was with a heavy heart that Verina came among the uncongenial guests, and their uncongenial laughter and thoughtless-

ness. They had not waited for her. The great dining-room was one blaze of light and magnificence, of dazzling silver plate, of glittering glasses and chandeliers ; and around the great table were assembled the rank and fashion of the county—ladies in splendid dresses, and with flower-wreathed heads—gentlemen in the gorgeous uniform of the Yeomanry of Berkshire. And now, through all that splendour, and the sounds of mingling voices and laughter, glided the young Lady Mordaunt, looking in her simple white dress, and with her still face and glowing eyes, like some spirit who by accident had wandered into a most inappropriate scene.

At Sir Arthur's right sat Lady Millicent, beautiful as ever, her raven hair looking even more lustrous than of old, her rich colouring more brilliant. The triumphant light still shone in her eyes ; and this same triumphant light she now flashed

proudly on the pale, forsaken Verina, as she haughtily acknowledged Verina's low, stately greeting.

Lady Catherine had taken her daughter-in-law's place ; and as Verina, unthinking, passed on towards it, Sir Arthur detained her with a frown that was meant to express his displeasure at her disregard of the proprieties of life, and pointed to the one vacant seat.

"The late Lady Mordaunt," said a voice ; and in spite of the remark's utter want of originality, many laughed. Sir Arthur frowned more ominously than before.

"Better late than never," said the elderly, good-natured Lady Herbert, by whose side Verina found herself.

"I am not of that opinion," said Sir Arthur pointedly. "If people cannot come in proper time, I should strongly advise their not coming at all."

It struck the good-natured Lady Herbert, who had not long been acquainted with the Mordaunts, that his tone was more severe than the occasion required; and that Lady Catherine might as well have resigned her daughter-in-law's place to her.

Though Verina blushed painfully at this public reproof, she received it in a rather haughty silence. All dinner-time she was more abstracted even than usual, observant only when a servant approached her; for each time she hoped he was bringing her a message from Evelyn's nurse. Each time was she disappointed. In her present mood the gaiety around her seemed to her more senseless, more provokingly heartless than ever. She was too impatient of it to attend to anything that went on, and was leaning back, lost in thought, when a "Verina!" in a tone that made most people look round, startled her from her reverie.

"Lady Herbert has spoken to you three times in vain," said Sir Arthur. He was conscious that the tone of his first address to her had a little overstepped the bounds of "appearances."

Now, none except his own family could have suspected that he spoke otherwise than very calmly ; but there was still a certain intonation in his voice which told Verina that he was altogether very provoked with her.

She was, and appeared, so distressed at her rudeness, that Lady Herbert said kindly :

"It is I who ought to beg your pardon for being so persevering in disturbing you."

The kind tone touched Verina, and she went on to explain her inattention by confiding to her that she was very anxious about her little girl.

Low as she spoke Amelia caught the words, and exclaimed :

"What nonsense! you are always so absurdly fanciful about that child."

As Amelia spoke she watched, with envious eyes, the vigorous flirtation Lydia was carrying on with a young good-looking officer—he entreating for a flower from her nosegay, Lydia half granting, half refusing his request.

When the ladies left the dining-room, Lydia detained her sister-in-law in the hall and said :

"Verina, you must be mad to provoke Arthur as you have done this evening. You know punctuality is his hobby. I can assure you he is excessively angry at having had to wait quite twenty minutes for you in vain, the more so as you never spoke one word all dinner-time. But don't look so alarmed ; it cannot be helped now. It is no use troubling yourself about it. You look more like a snowdrift than anything else," Lydia continued ; "your face

is as white as your dress. Has anything gone wrong more than usual ?”

In her manner there was an unusual friendliness. Since Verina had ceased to rival her in her brother's affections, Lydia's heart had secretly often smitten her for her share in the destruction of Verina's happiness. Her quiet, proud retirement from everything had touched Lydia far more than her once passionate grief, and now sometimes, when Lydia looked at her sister and saw her so grave and stately, a remorseful remembrance came over her of the sunny gladness of the confiding welcome with which, years ago, when first they came, Verina, then a young bright girl, had sprung to meet them ; and this evening she looked so worn and sad that Lydia felt something very like pity towards her.

Before Verina could reply the nurse approached them. “My lady,” she said,

"Miss Evelyn is so restless and feverish that I am quite uneasy : for I hear there is fever in the village. I thought, perhaps you would send for Dr. Arnold."

"Pray send for him at once," interrupted Lydia with impatience ; "but don't frighten Lady Mordaunt so unnecessarily. Miss Evelyn is often not well."

"Yes, send for him at once," said Lady Mordaunt quietly. The nurse withdrew.

The sisters-in-law were standing alone in the great hall, the full light of the chandelier falling on Lady Mordaunt's face. She was more white than ever now, as she leant her cheek wearily down upon the balustrade.

"You look very wretched," said Lydia compassionately.

"Yes, and so I am," she said, raising her bowed head and speaking with passionate bitterness ; "wretched as even you or Lady Catherine could desire—even she would

be satisfied, if she could know what I feel."

It was the first time that Verina had ever referred so openly to their hostility to her. Lydia was silent. She did not attempt to justify herself. She knew too well how merited was the reproach, and secretly she almost wished, now, that she had never alienated Verina from her ; that she had never rejected with contempt and unkindness the affection once offered her so freely, so confidingly. She wished she had a right to speak sympathising words to Verina, but she felt that sympathetic words would sound like mockery if they came from her, so she was silent.

After a little pause, Verina spoke again.

"If Evelyn dies, it will drive me mad," she said. There was something fearful in the calm, cold deliberation with which she spoke.

At that instant voices were heard crying, "Miss Mordaunt! Miss Mordaunt!" and

two or three young, laughing ladies crowded into the hall, and came up to them, rallying Lydia on her desertion of them ; and “ positively declaring ” that she should not escape them thus. Lydia was half inclined to give them an unceremonious dismissal. But another look at Verina told her that nothing she could venture to say could be any comfort ; so she yielded to her friends’ clamorous “ declarations,” and went away with them. She soon deserted them again and sought her brother, and called him aside. “ Arthur, promise me something,” she said.

“ That depends,” he said, “ what is it ?”

“ Promise me that you will not speak harshly to Verina to-night : she is wretched enough already about little Evelyn.”

Sir Arthur made no promise ; but inquired what was the matter with the child, and looked a little concerned when Lydia mentioned the possibility of an attack of fever.



CHAPTER XII.

THAT night, Doctor Arnold stood in grave consultation with Lady Mordaunt. Sir Arthur and Lady Catherine, also, were present. He did not conceal from them that Evelyn was attacked by the dreaded fever.

"It is in the village. Evelyn must have been there. Did you go there with her to-day, Verina?" inquired Lady Catherine sharply. "You know I told you, you ought not."

"Yes, we were there," Verina replied. "You refused to give me your reasons for what you said; and I had heard nothing of the fever."

“As usual, you did not choose to take any one’s advice. Well, whatever happens, it will be your own doing. *I* warned you !”

Doctor Arnold, by his age and long intercourse with the family, had acquired a right to say what he chose. He saw how painfully distressed Verina looked at the idea Lady Catherine had suggested, and interposed rather warmly : “Very likely Miss Evelyn did not catch the fever in the village at all. She may have had it hanging about her some time. She would easily take infection anywhere. She was always delicate.”

“And no wonder, considering the way she has been brought up,” remarked Lady Catherine.

Doctor Arnold’s predictions that it would be a very slight case were not fulfilled. Day after day the fever and delirium rapidly increased. Evelyn was dying.

As a drowning man, who thought he had found one little rock of safety, might watch the remorseless sea creeping, inch by inch, up it also, so did Verina watch day and night by her child, in dull despairing, tearless agony. She dared not think what life would be without Evelyn, "her one treasure."

It was the sixth night of watching; Lady Catherine came quietly to the bedside, and tried to induce Verina to let the nurse take her place, that she might sleep for an hour at least. But Verina's only answer was an impatient, determined refusal to leave her child.

Lady Catherine glided from the room quietly as she had come, and sought Sir Arthur. "My dear Arthur," she said when she had found him, "for the sake of the heir we hope for, Verina must take some rest. She will not listen to me—you must go and insist upon it."

Verina's only answer to him also was :
" I will have my own way in this."

" Very well ! but if you do not do as I bid you, you shall not even remain in the room to-morrow night. You think me harsh," he continued : " but it is absolutely necessary that you should take care of yourself."

" Yes, you would all rather I did not die, till you have a son and heir—then the sooner the better," said Verina, with the bitterness of great grief.

He did not take any notice of her exclamation—perhaps he could not deny its truth ; but merely repeated what he had said, adding as he left the room, " Remember, Verina, I fully mean what I say : your obstinacy is quite useless."

Bitterly Verina felt that it was very hard to be so treated at such a time ; but she knew remonstrance with him was vain. She could only crush her hands tightly

together, as though striving to crush down the impotent grief and anger that swelled within her.

“Do, my lady, lie down for a little,” said the nurse entreatingly. “You are not strong, and you look worn out. I will be sure and call you if Miss Evelyn alters ever so little.” And then Verina yielded, for she knew her husband too well to hope that his threat would be an empty one.

“You will not fail to call me,” she said as she lay down wearily on the nurse’s bed.

The nurse repeated her earnest assurances. She arranged a shawl around Verina, and when Verina had closed her eyes for rest, not sleep, the nurse stood for a moment, looking with great compassion on her young mistress.

Alas! there would be no need of another night’s watching. By the morning, the fever had almost left Evelyn; but all her

little strength was gone. When Doctor Arnold came to see her, Verina turned to him with an eager, wistful dawning of hope in her eyes. Words were unnecessary. Doctor Arnold knew well what that eager look said. But he turned mournfully away. The quiet of exhaustion, which Verina took to be a sign of amendment, he knew to be a sign of coming death.

"Lady Mordaunt," he said gently, "you must prepare yourself for whatever may happen. Do not buoy yourself up with too much hope."

Verina knew well what his words meant, and bowed her face down upon her hands in grief unspeakable.

Evelyn lingered through the day without pain or notice of anything, but before night came she was dead. Before she died, she opened her great eyes and fixed them on Verina. Her father, Lady Catherine, and her aunts were also present, come, prompted

by varying motives, to inquire themselves after the little invalid. Evelyn seemed conscious only of the presence of her dearly-loved mother.

“My own mamma,” she murmured, and tried to return Verina’s kisses.

Then the little sweet voice, whose accents did so entwine themselves round Verina’s heart, the life with whose life Verina’s seemed one, were stilled for evermore on earth. With a cry of bitterest agony, the childless mother sank down by her lost darling’s side.

“Oh ! dark, dark, dark,
Irrecoverably dark eclipse !”



CHAPTER XIII.

THE hearts of all smote them at the sight of Verina's terrible despair, for they knew well what good cause she had to cry that she had lost "her all;" but none approached her to speak to her in sympathy or tenderness.

Sir Arthur stood moodily, with folded arms, at the foot of the little bed, where lay all that remained to them of their child. Perhaps he was recalling the days in which he loved both wife and child—the little child who could not speak, but only laugh; and who used to make him feel so proud and pleased when it stretched out its tiny

arms confidently toward him. Since then, he had taught it to shrink from him—not confide in him; and now that last lesson could never be unlearned; little Evelyn could never tell the angels what a father's love meant. But though Sir Arthur might have been then thinking of the past, he neither looked at nor spoke to his wife. At length Lady Catherine addressed her with some commonplaces about "the duty of resignation." Verina only turned from her and wept heart-broken tears.

Doctor Arnold said in a hasty undertone:

"For Heaven's sake, Sir Arthur, try and comfort your wife. Do not let her stay here. Have you *no* pity for her?"

He went to her then.

"Let me take you to your own room," he said almost tenderly; but she did not hear him. She had fainted.

Without another word, he raised her in his arms and carried her to her own

dressing-room, and gently laid her on the sofa.

It was long before Verina regained consciousness; and with it came at once the remembrance of the aching void, the utter desolate emptiness henceforth in heart, and home, and life. She closed her eyes again, moaning faintly with the anguish that seemed greater than she could bear. Sir Arthur was standing beside her, and now he bent over her, and laid his hand on her fair head caressingly.

"You will have another child soon, Lina," he said—it was years since he had used that pet name.

The words he had said were no comfort to her, for she felt she could never love any child but Evelyn; but his slight caress thrilled her even then. She took his hand in her own small white ones; and fixing on him her eyes, wild and bright with pain, she murmured with piteous entreaty:

"You must love me now, for now I have no one else to care for me."

Sir Arthur only answered :

"If you have no friends it is your own fault. If you choose to isolate yourself from every one, and to dislike my mother and sisters, what else can you expect?"

Verina did not answer; only released his hand with a weary, hopeless sigh. After a little pause, Sir Arthur said more kindly :

"Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"No—nothing," replied Verina in a low, dreary voice.

"Then I must leave you for the present," he said, and rose to go; but before he went, he bent down to her and kissed her. It was a kiss of pity—not of affection.

"Do not mock me," she said, shrinking from him.

This irrepressible manifestation of her feelings he received with perfect indifference.

She listened to his retreating footsteps, and as the sound died away in the long corridor, a chill of such utter desolation struck coldly to her heart. Hour after hour passed over her, and still she was alone with her desolate grief—alone, unpitied, and unloved in this first anguish of her bereavement.



CHAPTER XIV.

FOR many weeks Verina refused to leave her room, even to join the rest of the family at meals. She scarcely noticed any one or anything, lying on the sofa day after day, white and still and tearless.

She had only one wish, that was to see Miss Harrington. She remembered now that Miss Harrington had spoken to her of a consolation which soothed every grief; and she knew not how to seek it unaided. One day, therefore, she sent to beg Sir Arthur to come to her, and then asked him to allow her to see Miss Harrington. He

only replied that she was unreasonable; that the thing was impossible; that he could not so far desert his principles as to allow any intimacy with those Tory Harringtons.

At length the ringing of bells, the firing of cannon, and the blazing of bonfires announced that Sir Arthur Mordaunt, of Mordaunt Hall, had a son and heir.

Rejoicings of every description followed the important news. Only in the mother's heart and darkened room there was no gladness. When the nurse exultingly laid the little heir in his mother's arms, she turned her face from him—he was her child, and yet *not* her child—not Evelyn.

It was evening on the same day of rejoicing. In a magnificent apartment, furnished with ostentatious luxury, where numerous attendants stole in and out, stepping softly even on the thick velvet carpet

—there on the stateliest of beds, which was decked with the richest of carvings and hangings, lay the young mother of the so warmly-welcomed boy. As the sun set, she sank into a feverish stupor, murmuring some name incessantly.

The attendant beside her stooped to listen. “Arthur, Arthur,” she heard her lady moan continually. She left her and stepped softly to where Evelyn’s nurse kept watch in the outer room.

“I scarcely know whether Lady Mor-daunt is conscious,” she said, “but if she is, she wants to see Sir Arthur; so will you send and let him know—strange that he has never been near her!”

The nurse shook her head sadly.

“It would do no good to send for Sir Arthur,” she replied; but would not gratify the curiosity Verina’s attendant expressed, to know the cause of so strange a state of things. Finding she could gain

no information, she at length went back to her post.

It was dusk in the darkened room when Verina returned to perfect consciousness. As she did so she cast around her a wistful, searching glance, and presently whispered :

“ Has Sir Arthur been here ? is he here ? ”

“ No, my lady,” replied her attendant in quick, business-like tones.

With a low sigh Verina closed her eyes, making no remark ; but when next the nurse brought her a necessary restorative she refused it.

In vain the astonished nurse urged that it was quite indispensable. Verina only repeated her refusal.

Presently she spoke again. The nurse listened ; she could scarcely catch the words, they were spoken so low, and not addressed to her.

“I am forgetting my promise,” murmured Verina to herself; and then in an accent of patient sadness, she said aloud: “Please give it me; I will take it now.”

Then with sad, wide-open eyes, Verina watched out the long, heavy hours, lying quietly there, in the midst of all that cold splendour, where nothing was wanting but that which money could not buy, and without which all other things were an oppressive mockery; for, oh, how gladly would she have relinquished them for the sight of one loving face beside her, for one loving hand in hers! In her weakness and her grief she did so need the tender care of affection.



CHAPTER XV.



ERINA'S recovery was very slow. Nor was she desirous that it should be otherwise ; her excessive weakness giving her an excuse for remaining entirely in her own apartments, and she was glad of any excuse that enabled her to do so, for it was almost with horror that she thought of the time when she should have to do, and speak, and appear as usual ; and of the heartless gaiety which, by-and-by, she must witness again and hear around her.

There was no one to watch over her convalescence as there had been when Evelyn was born. How vividly did

Verina recall that time! how vividly did she recall the tenderness with which Sir Arthur had then watched over her, sitting beside her and reading to her and talking to her; and the bright future which he used, for her amusement, half playfully to delineate, as awaiting their child!

When such remembrances arose before Verina she needed to shut her eyes quickly to keep back the hot tears; for Evelyn she never wept, she was too desolate for that. If any one would have clasped her in their arms and said tender words to her she could have wept; not otherwise, it was too hard, too cruel a sorrow for tears.

Evelyn had been to her the anchor of her life—the anchor that kept her calm and still through all things. Now that anchor was broken, and with it was gone from her all her proud self-dependence, leaving nothing in its place but the one terrible longing, crying through her desolate heart,

for something, anything, to which to cling—
for some friend upon whose breast to weep,

To its fullest extent Verina experienced this craving of the heart for human love and pity, which besets the lonely-hearted in their sorrow. Nothing, no one, ever came in any way to satisfy this craving which grew at times to an indescribable anguish. Her husband was the only person who could have comforted her in any degree. Therefore to him, once more, all her thoughts — that were not Evelyn's—turned.

She had faintly hoped that if her child proved a son, that he would love her again for her son's sake. It was a vain hope. Though he was very fond of his long-wished-for boy, he never came near Verina ; and even avoided visiting the nursery at the time Verina might be there. Alas ! the parents would never rejoice over their child together.

Perhaps, however, even Sir Arthur might have been softened if, sometimes, amidst his gay dissipations, a magic mirror could have shown him Verina's room. There, whilst bright words and gay music were around him, he would have seen a silent chamber, with his young wife dressed in her deep mourning, lying upon the sofa, her face hidden in the cushions, as through convulsive sobs and in broken accents she murmured his name. That name was often thus upon her lips, for now there had returned to her the old longing for one—if only one—kind word from him. Oh, if he only would, she thought, but once more, if only once more, clasp her to his heart, and call her "his own sweet wife."

Evelyn had filled the void in her heart. Now she had no one but him; and at times Verina would sob her very heart away, in the vain longing for his love. She was so quite alone in the world. Alone in the

world : it is so easy to write or read these simple words, beneath whose weight so many hearts have broken ; but it is not so easy to grasp their painful meaning—to imagine what it is, to know that in the whole wide world there is none upon whose breast you dare to lay your head ; not one whose eyes will light up at sight of you ; not one who will care to listen to and soothe the sorrow of your heart.

Verina knew now only too well the full meaning of those words.



CHAPTER XVI.

VERINA had felt no pleasure at the sight of her son. Still, after a time, to once more hold in her arms a living child, seemed to do her good. After his birth, she grew to take more notice of passing things. She still only cared to lie idly on the sofa, by an open window ; but now, as she looked down on her little son, lying in her lap, a faint, languid smile would sometimes steal over her face.

One day Lady Catherine came to Verina's room. She inquired with calm indifference after her health. She then,

with an unusual hesitation, and yet with a certain effrontery, began :

“ Arthur and I have just been talking about the boy ; and I thought I would come and tell you what we have agreed about him. First, however, let me entreat you to keep your temper, for my nerves cannot stand any violence, and I have Arthur’s sanction for what I am going to say ; and though you have hitherto seemed to forget the fact, he has as much right to his children as you have.”

“ What does all this mean ? What are you going to do with the child ? ” asked Verina in an alarm that startled her out of her indifference.

“ In the first place, send away that foolish nurse—no one but you would have kept her so long, and engage an excellent one I know of ; and what Arthur above all things wishes is, that I should direct the entire management of the child ; for,

pardon me, but you have never shown any judgment or discretion in the management of your children. How delicate Evelyn always was." Regardless of Verina's low, irrepressible cry of pain at the careless mention of Evelyn's name, Lady Catherine continued: "It did not signify about a girl who could not inherit the estates, but Arthur quite sees that it would be a culpable indulgence towards you to allow you to mismanage this child, as you mismanaged Evelyn."

"Lady Catherine," said Verina, sitting upright and speaking quickly and warmly, "I am not perfectly devoid of sense as you appear to think; but if you and Arthur are determined to take my child from me, of course I cannot prevent it. Nor, perhaps, do I care to do so," she added listlessly, as she sank back again on the cushions.

"If this is anything but affectation, let

me tell you that it is very wicked and unchristian to be so indifferent to everything," retorted Lady Catherine, trying to look virtuous. "Why can you never be content? you, who have so many advantages, such riches, and comforts, and such a position, but you do love to make yourself a martyr."

Every deliberate word uttered in that tone of lofty reproof exasperated Verina.

"Riches! position!" she exclaimed. "Do you think that such trifles can satisfy a desolate heart?"

"Really," replied Lady Catherine, with her slight sneering laugh—"really I cannot pretend to follow you into your Teutonic, sentimental extravagances. I am a plain Englishwoman, and don't understand romance."

Verina was silent, colouring deeply with vexation, to think that she had in any degree expressed her feelings to one so incapable of understanding them.

"I will only further say," continued Lady Catherine, with the assumption of a depressingly solemn sense of responsibility, through which thin veil her delighted importance was clearly visible—"I will only further remind you that it is as a favour to my son that I accept the charge of his child. It is a serious and solemn duty which I have had thrust—yes, *thrust* upon me. I only hope that I shall have strength to fulfil it!"

"I hope so too," said Verina sarcastically, "but if it is too much for you, perhaps you will give the child back to his mother!"

Verina found that she missed the charge of her boy more than she had thought possible. It was very vexatious to be allowed no more voice in his management, no more liberty to play with him when she liked, or to infringe any of Lady Catherine's numerous rules concerning him, than the

veriest stranger in the house. She used rather to look forward to the hour when he would be brought to her. Lady Catherine now decreed that the passages leading to Verina's rooms were draughty, and that, therefore, the child must on no account pass through them.

If Verina wished to see him she might go to him, not that Lady Catherine supposed so indifferent a mother would care to do this.

"Ah, baby ! do they say I do not love you ?" whispered Verina one day to the unconscious child. "I do love you, little one ; but you cannot talk to me, or love me, or be my own own, like your little angel sister."

Lady Catherine's "jewel of a nurse" knew that Lady Mordaunt had opposed her coming, and for this she vehemently disliked her. She also knew that she should lose nothing by incivility to Lady Cathe-

rine's daughter-in-law. Therefore, as she now entered the nursery, she said authoritatively :

“ If you wake Master Mordaunt I shall never get him to sleep again ; and if my lady hears him crying, she will be in a pretty way, so Lady Mordaunt, with your leave, he had better go back into his cradle.”

Without Lady Mordaunt's leave she would have unceremoniously lifted the boy from his mother's arms, but for the stately indignation with which Verina motioned her away.

“ He will sleep as well in my arms as in his cradle,” she said quietly.

The nurse, a violent-tempered woman, was indignant at this quiet rebuke. Bent on revenging herself, she began, under a thin veil of respect, to taunt Lady Mordaunt with her mother-in-law's authority.

“Master Mordaunt never sleeps well except in his cradle,” she went on ; “and if he does not sleep he will be ailing, and then my lady will be asking all sorts of questions, and how am I not to tell her the truth ? though I was nearly dismissed for taking him to your ladyship’s room the other day, when you sent for him. No offence, Lady Mordaunt, but her ladyship has no notion of your interfering.”

With a sudden impulse, Verina rose, and laid the boy in his cradle. She did so hurriedly, not tenderly arranging the soft coverlet over him, or pressing kisses on his sleeping face ; and as she left the room she said bitterly to herself :

“I forgot he was not my child. I forgot that I have nothing to do with him. Yes, and by-and-by Lady Catherine will come and scream nonsense to him, and carry him to his father, whilst I—I dare not touch him if it has pleased Lady Catherine

to say he shall sleep ; and if I go into his room, it is only to be insulted by Lady Catherine's servants ! Ah, my little angel-darling, you were not the 'son and heir,' Lady Catherine's child—you were my own little one."

Verina knew that she would never be allowed to gain any influence over her boy, nor to exercise any control over his education and the formation of his character. Lady Catherine did not conceal from her that this was hers and her son's intention. She had plainly told her that they considered the heir far too precious a person to be intrusted to her "absurd fancies" regarding education, or to run the risk of being taught to be a "poetical dreamer" like herself. No : the heir should grow up a "true Mordaunt," with no superfluous soft-heartedness ; no absurd refinement. He should not weep at the sight of others' suffering, nor love to pore over senseless

fairy tales, as his sister used, nor go wild with delight at the sight of blue butterflies hovering over a sunlit, dewy bank of golden lotus. Lady Catherine had once seen Evelyn do so. Her contempt had been inexpressible. No: Lady Catherine and Sir Arthur had determined that the boy should be altogether of a different temperament.

“To ensure this,” said Lady Catherine, “it will be necessary to prevent Verina’s ever gaining any influence over her son.”

Verina knew that remonstrance would be worse than useless. She therefore made none, though with pain she shrank from the idea of seeing any child of hers transformed into a “true Mordaunt.” This quiet acquiescence in what she was powerless to prevent, Lady Catherine had not failed to turn to advantage; Verina’s “indifference to her child” was become one

more of the many traits in Verina's character, over which to her son, or among her sympathising friends, Lady Catherine would uplift her hands in virtuous grief.



CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN Verina once more entered society, it was with a most forlorn sense of having no part in nor fellowship with the animated life around her. Her bark had been stranded on life's shore. From its brink she stood and watched how gaily others floated down on sparkling waves, past her lonely anchorage ; but in their energetic race she could not mingle. Every one else was pursuing schemes and pleasures, with plenty to do, and plenty to say ! She alone stood silent there, seemingly the only one who had no ties, no hope, no

object, and feeling as if between her and all others a deep gulf lay ; across which gulf none but a friendly hand could have reached—and towards Verina, at Mordaunt Hall, no friendly hand would ever be outstretched. The sweet human life she saw others living seemed so far away from her grasp. Her own existence scarcely felt like a “human” one, it was so cold, so dark, so purposeless, so void of any hope. But no murmur ever passed her lips again. Only day by day she grew more pale and a more melancholy darkness brooded in her deep eyes.

In one respect her return to society worked in her a great and sudden change. A great love contains within it a wonderful constancy and patience. Therefore it was, that through all these years, Verina had secretly cherished her first and only love, and no ungentle thought

toward her husband had ever found a resting-place in her heart. Now even to him her heart grew cold. She had fancied from his momentary kindness to her when Evelyn died, that he in some degree shared her sorrow. She had scarcely seen him since, so the delusion was not dispelled till she once more came amongst the others. Then she heard him refer to Evelyn with a heartless indifference that revolted her from him with a sudden and complete revulsion of feeling. She felt as if it would be an unkindness to her Evelyn, any longer to love one who was so indifferent to her ; and thus at length Verina's long-cherished love towards her husband had faded from her like an unsubstantial dream. It is more desolate to love nothing than to be unloved. And Verina found it so.

One Sunday afternoon the pleasant

sunshine was lying in broad plains of cheerful light on the sparkling turf in the garden at the Grange. It also looked in through the open window, at Margaret Harrington's quiet sitting-room, and found her engaged in reading, her quiet face already illumined with a brighter sunshine than the sunbeams could throw there. In that little room there was such a holy quiet, on that cheerful face such a heavenly peace, that the very breeze seemed to steal in and out quietly for fear of breaking so magic a spell.

But as footsteps were heard approaching, Margaret hastily laid down her book, and when the door was opened she eagerly asked :

“ Have you seen Lady Mordauht ? ”

“ Yes,” answered Rollo ; “ for the first time she was there in the great pew ; but it was piteous to see her sweet face, and her golden hair shrouded in all

that black, and her slight figure looking more slight and fragile than ever in her deep mourning. I am sure they are not kind to her," Rollo went on, "for there is a look in her face that is not much like the calmness natural to grief; and, besides, the way Sir Arthur speaks to her! A christening began and they christened the child by her little girl's name. When she heard the name she drew the thick veil over her face and sat down, hiding her face in her hands, evidently completely overcome. I think every one felt for her, except that most detestable Sir Arthur. He evidently was much annoyed, and with the blackest of faces he bent down to her and whispered something. Her only answer was a slight, impatient motion of her hand, as if to bid him leave her in peace; but when with that look which every one who has anything to do with him knows

to mean nothing pleasant, he bent down to her again, with a great effort she quieted herself and stood up."

Margaret sighed, and Rollo added :

" I felt so angry."

Rollo would have been still more indignant could he have accompanied the Mordaunts homewards. The Mordaunt carriage drove up to the church door. Lady Catherine and her daughters entered it, but when Verina was about to follow, Sir Arthur detained her.

" You had better walk home with me," he said, the " had better " meaning " you must." There was no pleasant look in his face, and Verina would willingly have excused herself from a *tête-à-tête* with him.

" It is too far," she answered almost wilfully. " I am tired already."

" However delicate you may choose to consider yourself, I have no doubt you

can walk home by the short cut," he replied, and ordered the coachman to drive on.

When they were alone, he began vehemently : " I wish to goodness you would not make such a parade of your feelings—I was perfectly ashamed."

Contending emotions brought the colour back in a rich tide to Verina's pale cheek, but she listened to him in silence. Sir Arthur continued angrily :

" I wish to tell you that these childish exhibitions are more than I have patience for. I desire, therefore, that you will not appear again in public, till you have learnt more self-command."

Little could Sir Arthur's cold temperament divine what thronging memories, of cherished playful ways, of arch words and merry laughs, of tender kisses from rosy lips, of caressing hand-clasps from tiny hands, the unexpected sound of that now

silent name had flashed upon his wife, thus overpowering by the suddenness of the assault her usual self-control. So Sir Arthur called her tears parade!

On the steps Lady Catherine met them. "Well!" she said in rather a higher key than promised amiability; "I hope Arthur has spoken to you about the impropriety of your behaviour—you forget that you are now a Mordaunt of Mordaunt Hall, whatever you may have been once,"

"And the correct thing being that no Mordaunt should have anything so plebeian as a heart, you are expected to act as if you had none either," broke in Lydia's sarcastic voice.

Lady Catherine turned angrily to her daughter.

"What, you don't like my lucid exposition of your creed?" laughed Lydia.

During the strife that ensued, Verina hastily left them, bearing with her the

burning vain resentment to which she dared not give expression, though she despised herself for not daring. It would be difficult to pass a more wretched afternoon than Verina did this Sunday in her solitary room, the painful sense of the harsh injustice of every one, and of her own isolation, making her bitter grief more bitter still; and there were no childish kisses now to kiss away her tears.

Lydia meanwhile entered the drawing-room and began to play what she called chants, though they remarkably resembled opera tunes. Sir Arthur followed her. He was excessively offended at her having taken Verina's part against him; and was evidently in the mood bitterly to reproach her for it. Lydia was really fond of her brother; but there was nothing in the world she liked better than an encounter even with him. Therefore it was with great amusement that she regarded, in the

looking-glass, the reflection of his face, and read in it what was passing in his mind. By way of improving his temper, she nodded to this his reflection, with what was meant to be—and was—a most provoking good humour.

“I wish, Lydia—” he began impatiently.

“My dear Arthur, it is no use talking to me when I am playing,” she replied. “I never hear a word that’s said.”

Sir Arthur sat down and waited, but Lydia played on.

“Are you not tired of playing?” he presently asked in a tone that said, “I am very tired of hearing you.”

“Oh dear no, not at all,” rejoined Lydia cheerfully; “I can go on for hours yet.”

“The saints forbid!” muttered Sir Arthur.

He waited a little longer and then exclaimed :

“Do be quiet, I want to speak to you.”

And Lydia at length quitted the piano,

saying as she did so : " I have been playing all this time on the strength of that proverb beginning, ' Music has charms to soothe the—' you remember the rest, don't you ?"

Sir Arthur deigned no reply to this ; but began :

" Why have you taken of late to upholding Lady Mordaunt in everything ? It is very provoking of you."

" I suppose you refer by that comprehensive epithet to what has just passed, as I am sorry to say that I never remember having done so before, though really the way you and Lady Catherine go on, is quite enough to drive any one distracted. If I had been Verina, I am sure I should have contrived to administer a little poison to you before now."

" Childish nonsense !" he exclaimed angrily. " What ! would you have me give in to all her absurd ways ? Why will

she not take things calmly, like other people?"

"Why is not her hair black?" rejoined Lydia.

"Lydia, you are excessively provoking and interfering to-day! what may pass between me and my wife is no business of yours, be so good as to remember that."

"I am afraid you have not profited by Mr. Norris's sermon," remarked Lydia coolly; "though I really believe that he wrote it on purpose for you; for his characteristics of a "violent man" did so remind me of you. Besides I saw him glancing at you whenever he came to a very telling bit. I should not wonder if he had applied to Verina for notes on the subject—as one would go to the keeper of wild beasts to ask for anecdotes regarding them!"

"It is a strange revolution in things to hear *you* upholding her—you, who first

opened my eyes about her!" said Sir Arthur bitterly.

"I did not know her then, and you did the more shame to you for listening to me."

Sir Arthur grew very angry. "Once for all, Lydia, I tell you plainly that I will not permit you to encourage Lady Mordaunt in any opposition either to me or to my mother."

"And I, my dear Arthur, as plainly tell you, that now, as ever, I shall do and say exactly what pleases me."

"Oh, very well," he exclaimed, throwing himself into a chair with his back to her, and taking up a newspaper. "Lady Mordaunt is not worth so much discussion; only you will have to choose between us. Side with her if you like; but don't expect me to have anything more to do with you in that case."

To this Lydia made no reply; but by

way of soothing his irritation, she sat down again to the piano, and played over and over again a certain tune which she knew he detested. At length he could endure it no longer. With an exclamation of impatience he rose and left the room. When the door had closed behind him Lydia ceased her music, laughing heartily.

Resolutely as Lydia had asserted her intention to do as she pleased, she did not really intend to oppose her brother's prejudices. She was not the least inclined really to break with him for the sake of a little knight-errantry. Therefore, never again by either word or look did she betray the slightest sympathy with the unhappy Verina.



CHAPTER XVIII.

IT was a dreary November afternoon. The sky was clouded, and a sad heavy mist, half rain, half fog, shrouded the park, and the trees, and the hills beyond. Everything was wet and dripping; and about everything there was a desolate oppressive atmosphere; even the rooks' cheerful voices were silent, and they hovered languidly above their forsaken nests in the wet fir trees. The day had been gloomy enough before, but now the early fading of the light added an additional sadness.

Lydia's voice had just announced that it

was already "too dark for any one to read without spectacles."

"As if spectacles would make any difference," rejoined Amelia, who always took everything in its literal sense.

Early in the day it had been declared to be too wet for any one to think of going out; and so ever since luncheon, the ladies had sat working and gossiping; the younger ones occasionally enlivening the time by a little coquetry with any gentleman who loitered into the room after a game at billiards, or a walk in the driving rain.

All this, to Verina, long, dreary afternoon, she had sat a little apart from the rest, unnoticed and uncared for, her sad countenance and deep mourning making her look much out of place amongst gay dresses and ceaseless chatter. A book lay open before her, but it was not often that a page was turned. In a half-dreamy way she was listening to what went on around

her : but through all she heard, and all she thought, the mother's heart was full to overflowing with the vain, vain longing for the childish step and voice she would never listen to again. Formerly she used through all things to have a secret source of joy—the thought of the delighted bound into her arms, and the warm kisses that would be hers, when she should steal away to Evelyn's room. Now, nothing brighter haunted her than the remembrance of a silent nursery. The presence of the numerous guests oppressed her greatly. She would willingly have retired again entirely to her own apartments; but she knew the indignant opposition such a step would arouse, and therefore did not attempt it.

At length she quitted the drawing-room. As the door closed behind her, she gave a sigh of relief, and walked on listlessly and aimlessly through the dark, twilight hall, to what was called the "little library."

The room was empty, and the fire burnt dimly in the grate. Verina drew a low chair close to it, and sat listlessly down, resting her head upon her hand, and looking dreamily into the fire; and scarcely less heavy and gloomy was Verina's heart than the dark winter day with its rainy mist and leaden sky.

Before long a servant entered, bearing a large and heavy foreign letter. In appearance it was worn and ancient, and the cover was one mass of "Try heres" and "Try theres." Evidently it had been a long time on its travels; nor did Verina wonder at this when she glanced at the direction, for it could not boast much resemblance to "Lady Mordaunt, Mordaunt Hall." Another glance and she recognised Gretchen's feeble writing, and hastily tore the envelope open. With emotion, she saw that it contained a long letter in her father's hand. "It must have

been," she thought, "the work of his last hours, and posted by poor Gretchen after his death."

The lingering light was just sufficient to let her easily decipher the firm, clear writing. She bent eagerly over it. The first few tender words brought tears to her eyes, but as she read on, all other feelings became absorbed in the astonishment and interest which its strange revelations aroused.

HERR MARINGEN'S LETTER.

"MY VERINA,

"You cannot, you say, come to me; but do not fear that I shall doubt your love. I know that you would come were it possible for you. That you cannot do so makes me sad, not only because I shall never see you again, but because it warns me that the forebodings which so surprised you on the eve of your wedding-

day were only too well founded. Alas ! poor child, there would not have been that half-concealed, resentful grief in your letter, if all was as it should be. I am on my deathbed, and, alas ! powerless to give you protection from the harshness of the world ; but at least do not let the thought that I can doubt your affection any longer distress you. I do not doubt it, my Verina.

“ My child, I have much to say to you, and but little time or strength. I must therefore waste neither, but at once proceed to detail to you in writing that which I desired to narrate to you with my own lips.

“ A cruel and false accusation of a great crime rests upon my name, and I would not willingly die without leaving it in your power to deny its truth. It may be that you will hear the story of my life, as others tell it ; and it would grieve me to leave the world, knowing that you have only your

faith in my character, unfounded on any assurance from my lips, to save you then from the painful belief that your father was a base and cruel murderer.

“Yes, of this am I accused, and by those who ought to have been my nearest and dearest. The bitterness of that time is passed. I can think and write calmly of that dark passage in my life ; but once life seemed to me too great an agony to bear, and the whole world was dark and joyless.

“I, a dying man, now solemnly swear that I am innocent ; and I charge you, my child, to guard my memory in your own heart at least.

“You have known me only as the painter Maringen. In reality I am the eldest son of the Count von Siegmaringen, and the rightful heir of the Castle of Uznach, and the wide lands pertaining to that our old Stamhaus. And my rank is yours, my child. Therefore it was no

simple burgher-maiden, but the Countess Verina von Siegmaringen, Sir Arthur Mordaunt espoused that summer morning years ago. I could tell you of the greatness and the antiquity of our family, but I care not for such things now ; and long ago I voluntarily resigned my name and rank because those who shared it with me were hateful to me.

“ Yet a softer feeling comes over me, even as I write ; for in imagination before me rises the old fair Castle of Uznach—my long lost home ! It is forty years since I was there ; but in my youth it seemed to me that no such lovely spot could be found anywhere else on earth. That may have been a boyish fancy, born only of my great love for it ; but no, oh no ! it must in truth be beautiful, my old, fair home !

“ Uznach is situated on one of the highest ridges of the rocky hills that skirt the Danube along the wildest part of its course.

Here, on each side, impregnable rocks shut in the rapid river, and thus force it to become more narrow, and in consequence more dark, and deep, and rapid. In the winter time, when the floods were breaking, how wildly it used to roar past, its dark waves bearing torn boughs and shattered wrecks so swiftly by ! How we used then to delight in the danger of the passage across to the pine-woods on the opposite shore ! Ah, those were glorious days, when every danger was a delight, and everything a source of enjoyment to me, in my youthful strength and daring ; when down that perilous descent from the castle to the river, I could spring from rock to rock, with an unfaltering foot, and a clear head that no peril could turn giddy ; when I used to chase the wolves, and spear the wild boars in the mountains on my ready horse—poor beautiful Roland—then as full of

fire and spirit as myself. Little did we then, either dream of the fate which awaited us on the Danube's bank—that there, for my sake, poor Roland should die, and his master—but I will not anticipate my tale.

“I was, as I have said, the eldest son. The present Countess was my father's second wife, and the mother of five tall, handsome youths. It is not often that a step-mother can feel any tenderness towards her step-son, especially if he holds the position she would naturally wish to see possessed by her own child. My step-mother was no exception to the rule. Between us there was ever a smouldering fire of ill-will, more it must be said on her part than on mine, for I troubled myself little about her. As long as I could, I treated her with that quiet civility which is a more impregnable barrier to attacks than

any fierce retort. At times my patience, which was never very great, gave way. The consequence would be a fierce altercation with my father also. Each time this occurred he grew to regard me with less and less favour, and to maintain a still keener apprehension of my thoughtless disregard of the many strict rules that he proscribed for his household. Occasionally a rather uneasy conviction that my family regarded me somewhat as an outcast and an alien, forced itself upon me; but somehow this troubled me little. If my brothers avoided me, and thus gained the half-expressed approval of my father, in whose eyes whatever dispute arose between us, I was invariably in the wrong—I did but the more warmly and heartily throw myself into the society of my especial friends and ‘dutzbrüder.’ My brothers belonged to one set, I to another. Probably we were all quite con-

tent that it should be so. At any rate, I was.

“ I was the eldest, the future Count of Uznach, and of course this brought me a far superior consideration to that which my brothers obtained. This vexed the Countess greatly, and increased her dislike to me. Perhaps I should not have felt such indifference to this dislike, had I known how completely she was undermining me in my father’s affection and good opinion. It was, maybe, fortunate for the peace of the household as I grew older that my student life at Heidelberg kept me many months in the year absent from Uznach. Not less pleasant than my home life were the months I spent amongst my mad companions at Heidelberg. A student’s life is wild enough anywhere in Germany; but perhaps Heidelberg students are most uncurbed and uncurbable, with their mad exploits, their fierce quar-

rels, their desperate duels, and their 'eternal' friendships ; all varying a life of alternate hard study and pleasant excitement ; and everything made endurable and delightful by good fellowship, honourable feelings, light hearts, and warm attachments. In those days I cared little for the talent which has been the solace and delight of my later years. It was not a sufficiently active employment for me then.

" In every house within twenty miles and more of Uznach, I and Roland were well known and heartily welcome. But at the Castle of Kufstein, there ever awaited me a welcome that thrilled me as none other could. It was a smile of tremulous delight from two rosy lips, a joyous light in a pair of downcast beaming eyes, and the touch of a soft, white hand that would rest for a moment in mine, half gladly, half afraid. When Verina von Starenheim was little more than sixteen, she became


my betrothed. How I adored my sweet, playful, childlike bride, who, for all her childlike gaiety, was a true woman at heart, and capable of planning and performing the sternest deed, though little did I or any one imagine what depth of feeling, what strength of purpose, were concealed beneath that childlike exterior, as she flitted about with her dancing step, her soft, merry, mischievous laugh, and her playful wilfulness—a wilfulness that was so charming. You, my child, are called after her, and you always have especially admired those creations of mine, whose faces were a transcript, though but a faint one, of the beaming countenance which I could never forget, and yet never paint as it really looked in life.

“No one, alas! was aware of our engagement. We could not doubt that Verina’s parents would gladly accept me for their son-in-law, but we knew that they would

say that Verina was as yet too young to become my wife; and we fancied that as our marriage must anyhow be delayed, it would be so much pleasanter to keep our happy secret to ourselves, than to publish it for the amusement and gossip of our neighbours. For fear of the betrayal of our secret, we did not even correspond with one another during my absence. In consequence, the months I spent at home became all the more precious.



CHAPTER XIX.

“ HAVE now, my Verina, rapidly narrated to you the first era of my life. It was, as you have seen, full of brightness. Now commences the second and darker era which will end but with my life.

“ One autumn evening, I sat alone in my room. It was the 10th of September, 1801—the date seems burnt into my memory. That very day I had returned from Heidelberg; and as usual, we had all separated for the night, exactly as my father’s watch pointed to ten. This was a strict rule, strictly enforced, though I doubt

whether in reality any but the Countess retired to bed at that hour. At least I never did, and never supposed that my brothers did either, though such an infraction of his orders would, had my father been aware of it, have been regarded by him as a serious offence.

"I was sitting in my own room. I had left the glass doors open, for the night was calm and warm, and the stars most brilliant; and as I sat looking at them, a smile was on my lips, for I was thinking how next morning, early, I and Roland would gallop away to Kufstein and win one of Verina's brightest smiles.

"Suddenly I heard a step without. Scarcely had I time to wonder who it could be, before Verina herself rushed into my arms, taking refuge there like a pursued and frightened dove. She was dressed in white as though for some fête, but the white dress was cold and damp, and the

dew lay heavily on her hair ; and she clung to me in such terror and dismay that I was filled with alarm. It was not till I had soothed her with caresses and assurances that with me she was safe from everything, that she could speak. Then she sobbed :

“ ‘ Oh, Rodolph, Rodolph ! it was not my fault, I dared not refuse—oh, why did you not come before ?—it is too late now—oh, no, no, no, it is not too late ! oh, save me, Rodolph ! ’ she wildly cried.

“ ‘ Be calm, dearest, and tell me from what, and I will save you from it, or lose my life in the attempt,’ I answered.

“ Verina continued more calmly, though she still trembled violently.

“ ‘ This very evening—only a few minutes ago—I have signed the marriage contract between me and Count Otho von Waldenberg. Weeks ago, I told my mother that we were betrothed, and that I loved you, and could love only you, and I implored

both her and my father to have pity on me. But my father was inexorable, calling my love for you a childish fancy which I should soon forget ! Alas, in some way he is in the power of Otho's father, and I—I am to be bought and sold for his releasement.'

" I felt my heart stand still—I could not speak. Verina went on :

" ' This evening my mother led me without previous warning into the great hall of the castle ; and I found myself in the presence of my father, my brother, the Waldenbergs, and many others ; but all their faces swam before me, when my father took my hand, and leading me to a table, bade me write my name below that of Otho's. He had already signed the marriage contract, and now he stood looking at me with his pitiless smile. How my heart filled with hate towards him, and he saw that it did so, and he triumphed over me ; remembering how once I had told him

that I did not love him, and would never marry him; and his own reply—he said then, as you know, that he was aware to whom he was indebted for my refusal, and that he would be revenged. I only laughed at his threat, and sprang away from him to you. And do you remember how we purposely braved him that evening by letting him see how happy we were together? It was our hour of triumph then. Alas, now it was his; and at this he pitilessly rejoiced. My father saw my hesitation, and whispered sternly: “Verina, if you do not wish for your father’s curse, obey me; and believe me too, that there are means at Kufstein for subduing the most refractory.”

“‘What could I do? There was no one there who would not have sided with my father, for even my mother has always said that no girl has a right to choose her husband. I was utterly alone and

friendless, so—ah, forgive me, Rodolph!—when my father placed the pen in my hand, I signed my name. I scarcely knew what I was doing. Otho approached me; but I turned from him with loathing. I can remember nothing more, except that I fainted then. When I recovered, I found myself in my own room. My mother, and the Countess Waldenberg were busied with restoratives. By some happy instinct I soon closed my eyes again, and they thought that I was inclined to sleep from exhaustion. “Verina will be well when she awakes,” said my mother; “we will leave her alone here for a little, the quiet will restore her.”

“‘An almost delirious hope shot through me at these words, for I knew that to-day you, Rodolph, would return. I lay quite still, and they left the room. I listened till I heard their steps no longer; then I sprang up—fortunately remembering to

lock my door—and hurried down my private way to the garden. Yes, I had escaped ! and then through the darkness I fled to you. And now, oh, save me, save me !’ she cried again, with a terror which thrilled my whole being.

“ I was scarcely less pale and dismayed than herself, though more self-controlled, for I had to think and act for both of us, in this our great peril. I assured her again and again of my love and my forgiveness ; and that I would save her if it lay in human power. I know that I spoke quietly, and that my quietness gave Verina courage ; but my pulses were throbbing wildly with the dreadful foreboding that to save her was impossible.

“ ‘ We must fly instantly,’ I said, ‘ before your escape is discovered. Dearest Verina, will you stay here alone, for one moment, whilst I fetch Roland ?’ but Verina clung to me like a frightened child, and whis-

pered that I must not leave her, that she would go with me. So I threw my student cloak tenderly round the little white form, and together we stepped out through the glass doors. When we reached the stables, I persuaded Verina to wait without, alone, for it was essential that no idle groom should see my companion. Torn with anxious impatience as I was, it was nearly martyrdom to watch the groom's slow progress, as he laid the saddle on Roland's back. Impatiently I pushed the man aside, and endeavoured myself to fasten the buckles ; but my hands trembled so that I could not, and was therefore obliged to resign the task to the groom again. He looked at me and laughed with the friendly familiarity of an old retainer.

“ ‘ We shall hear something surprising to-morrow, eh, mein Herr ? ’ he said.

“ I controlled myself and laughed too.

‘But whatever you do,’ I said with pretended lightness, ‘keep my secret ; tell no one that I am gone out to-night.’

“ ‘Never fear, Count,’ he answered ; ‘if the lord himself questions me, I’ll swear you are safe in bed.’

“ This earnest assurance quieted one source of anxiety.

“ At last, Roland was ready, though the groom had insisted on buckling every strap, and smoothing every glossy hair, whilst I looked on growing almost frantic with every instant’s delay.

“ I led Roland to Verina’s side. I raised her in my arms, and away we flew. As Uznach disappeared behind us in our rapid flight, I breathed almost freely. My intention was to reach the nearest frontier—once across it, there we should be safe. The road thither lay close down along the banks of the Danube, and on one side of us was the river ; on the other, the impreg-

nable perpendicular cliffs, with alders and hazel trees clinging here and there in the clefts of their rocky sides. I rejoiced in the thought that we had escaped unseen. Alas, it was not so. As we left Uznach, my youngest brother had heard the sound of horses' rapid feet, and attracted by the sound, was just in time to catch a glimpse of us as we disappeared round the clump of elms.

"The night was, as I have said, calm and still; the river flowed swiftly past with a pleasant monotonous rushing sound; this quiet of nature, together with the belief that we were now safely on our way to freedom and happiness, all contributed to calm me. Therefore, after a time, I proceeded more slowly. I thought, too, that it would be wise to keep Roland's fire for an hour of need; and though I was calmer, I still listened with throbbing anxiety, lest pursuers should be following me and the

trembling prize I clasped to my heart. With an unsteady hand I drew aside the sheltering mantle, and looked silently down on the pale, gentle face that rested on my breast in the silence of complete exhaustion. Worn out by fear and grief, now that she had found a haven of rest, all Verina's strength had deserted her, and she lay in my arms motionless and drooping as any snowdrop. How beautiful looked that sweet face with the golden curls blown over it in graceful confusion by the night wind ; and with the half-closed eyes looking like deepest, bluest gentian buds, weighed down by two twin flakes of snow ! The night was so still, that face so beautiful, that I almost forgot our danger.

“ Suddenly this delusive calm was broken. I heard what sounded to me like the distant echo of horses' hoofs thundering along behind us, on the margin of the river. For another moment I paused to listen.

Then I could no longer doubt that it was so—that we were discovered and pursued. Oh, how tight grew the agonising pressure round my heart! ‘Oh, Roland, Roland, save us now,’ I thought, ‘for you only can!’ I could not tell Verina of the dreadful discovery; she would learn it soon enough. Again I put spurs to my horse, and again away we flew, swiftly as lightning. Few horses could equal Roland in strength or speed, and a ray of exulting hope rose in my heart as we sped swiftly on, flashing past tree, and rock, and river—though only to find fresh lines of cliffs and trees before us; and still the Danube rushing murmuring by.

“Fast as Roland could go, he, poor animal, had but just returned from a long journey, and my pursuers were mounted on fresh and eager horses; thus Roland’s superior powers were neutralised. We were, however, still well ahead.

“For three miles and more this desperate chase swept thus along the Danube’s shores.

“I hoped that they would after a time resign the pursuit, thinking it vain. They would have done so, but that my father himself urged it on when others called it hopeless. He and my brothers had joined the furious Starenheimers, nay, had even set them on the right track. Oh, my father, you might have had compassion on your son ! I knew nothing of all this then. Then I only knew that like a pack of hungry wolves they still followed on my track ; and that they would thus follow till our horses dropped, I felt convinced with a despair which cannot be described. I had not spoken to Verina, but I knew that she had heard our pursuers almost as soon as I did, for her blue eyes were wide open now, gazing back into the night with a cold, glassy stare that was painful to see ; and I

could feel how convulsively she trembled. I knew that our very lives were hanging on each rapid stride my good horse made. I knew, too, that Verina felt this also, and that the same dull agony was creeping over her, as was closing round my aching heart. I bent down to her and kissed her pale cheek, and whispered words of encouragement, though my voice was husky with the great tension of anxiety. Verina looked up at me and smiled even then, but oh, so faintly. That was all that passed between us.

“Madly we galloped on ; no stones, no rocks, no trunks of trees—frequent as were such impediments on this little-used road—had any power to make me slacken our speed. How could I do so, when all our happiness was hanging on such a slender thread?—yet, if Roland stumbled we were lost. But no ; though sometimes I closed my eyes in agony when we came suddenly

on some block of stone, not for one instant did Roland falter. With one vigorous bound we had crossed the obstacle, and were speeding on again. I had no need for spurs or whip. The noble creature seemed to know our peril, and to strain every nerve to save us; the sound of hoofs behind him, and the shouts of our pursuers all contributing to excite him in this our wild midnight ride.

“Oh, it was maddening to hear those pursuers still! They would not leave us! A wild, mad anger rose in my heart; I could have torn them to pieces in my despairing wrath!

“All now depended on our respective powers of endurance. I do not know how long the chase had continued, or how far we had gone—in moments like these all knowledge of time is lost, hours seeming like instants, instants like many hours; but at length my horse's sides were white

with foam, his breath came heavily, and once or twice he stumbled; but when I laid my hand upon his neck and spoke to him, he pricked up his drooping ears and bounded on again with redoubled vigour. So for a time I almost concealed from myself that the poor faithful creature's strength was flagging. Soon, however, I could no longer doubt that his vigorous bound was indeed growing feeble; that his rapid speed was slackening, his footing growing more and more uncertain. At last, at last, they must be gaining on us! With a voice that was unsteady in my agitation I spoke again to Roland, and patted his wet neck; and as though responsive to the voice he knew so well, again he summoned all his strength. Alas, no endurance could aid us more. The mischief was done; they were within pistol-shot of us, and frantic with rage and the excitement of their wild chase. I could hear their voices plainly

now. They shouted to me, old Starenheim pouring abuses and curses on me for thus stealing his child ; in his rage he said what he could not, did not believe—that it was against her will. They shouted to me to stop, and I could hear my father curse me and disown me, but yield I would not.

“ I heard the click of a pistol ! I knew then that in another instant all would be over ; that the lifetime as it seemed of suspense and agony, which had wrung me since Verina threw herself into my arms, would be ended. What would follow then I dared not think ; but with eyes that grew glazed in their despair, I looked with a sharp, quick glance from earth to heaven—up the black cliffs by my side, across the rapid river, seeking help or way of escape. None—none was possible. The rocky shores of the Danube were impregnable for any one, with even so light a burthen as Verina—and the river was swollen and

rapid, neither Roland nor I could stem it encumbered as we were. No; to dash straight on along that white and winding road, which seemed to stretch on before us for ever, was our only chance. All this must have passed quick as lightning through my mind, for an instant after I had heard the pistol cocked, it was fired.

“Verina gave a faint scream. Roland plunged madly forwards, tossed his head in the air with a cry of pain, and fell headlong to the ground. Even now it makes me shudder to recall the frantic anguish which seized me, as poor Roland sank beneath me, and I knew that now, indeed, all hope was passed. I had barely time to spring to my feet and raise Verina in my arms, ere our pursuers thundered up and around us on their excited, foam-flecked, breathless horses. The two Counts rode foremost.

“ ‘Villain, give me my daughter!’ Staren-

heim shouted furiously as he sprang from his horse.

“‘Shoot him if he makes any resistance,’ cried my father, mad with rage; ‘he has disgraced me, I disown him for my son.’

“In a calmer moment I might have asked how I had disgraced my family by what I had done. In a calmer moment I might have asked this, but then the dread of losing Verina absorbed all other thoughts or feelings.

“Again with a despairing glance I gazed up at the crags above us, and across the swollen river by our side. The moonbeams were leaping from rock to rock; and the deep shadows of night were lying in their dark recesses, and under the massive blocks of ivy-clad stones, which from the summit of the cliff overhung the winding path below, like the crest of a curled and ponderous wave. Little streamlets were oozing out

of their rocky beds and trickling over the damp moss which clung round the roots of the alder bushes, and the shrub-like oaks, that grew here and there in the cliff, waving their branches slowly to and fro, their leaves dried and shrunken by autumnal winds and dyed in gaudy autumnal tints of red and brown and gold. Since that moment I have never seen a fading leaf without a pang of the despair with which I looked upon them now.

“I saw all this with my eyes, but not with my mind. It was not till afterwards that the whole scene came clearly before me. Then I only saw that those cruel crags barred all escape. The Danube, too, flowed past, in remorselessly turbid depth and strength ; I saw how the riven branches it had brought down from the mountains were dashed madly past, trembling in the grasp

of its curling waves; and knew that in such a flood we could find death only. Yes, both man and nature were combined against me.

“Why did I not yield? Why did I not give up my treasure, when I could no longer protect her from their grasp? I know not. I know not what I hoped, what miracle I expected, but with the same instinct that makes a drowning man grasp the merest straw, I threw myself before Verina and drawing out my loaded pistol, I fiercely exclaimed, ‘Fire if you will, but not a step nearer shall any man come and live!’ I was almost mad in that terrible moment.

“‘Rodolph, I dare you to lift your hand against me!’ said my father, and disregarding my wild words, he advanced undauntedly upon me. Oh, horror! I did but half hesitate to draw the trigger even on him—even on my father! Thank

Heaven, I *did* hesitate, or a hopeless contrition and remorse would have haunted my life, worse, far worse than the grief that I have borne.

“At that moment Verina threw herself once more into my arms, and, clinging to me, entreated me to throw away my pistol.

“‘You shall not load yourself for my sake with sin and remorse,’ she whispered. ‘Oh, Rodolph, will not *even you* heed me?’ she pleaded.

“There was a sharp splash in the Danube’s waters, my only weapon sank down to its stony bed, and I stood there defenceless, clasping Verina to my heart.

“The Count von Starenheim now laid his hand on his daughter’s shoulder.

“‘Weak, misguided girl,’ he sternly said; ‘dare you even in my presence thus display your guilty love for this man

—this disgrace to the name of Siegmaringen! It is vain to resist me, you must return home with me. Be thankful that I do not utterly discard you, and that Otho von Waldenberg is still willing to make you his wife, even after conduct so unmaidenly as yours.'

"But Verina only clung closer to me in shuddering horror.

" 'Oh, Rodolph, save me! save me!' she murmured. And I could not, oh misery! misery!

" 'You will not obey me, Verina?' pursued the Count in a tone still more cold and pitiless; 'then in two minutes more Count Rodolph shall be lying dead at your feet, and it will be you who have caused his death.'

"Alas, I felt the soft hold relaxing now. Slowly, slowly she raised herself from my arms; she lifted her face towards mine; there was a chill of dread and

agony in those blue eyes which was fearful to see; and a stern, hard determination in the girlish face which I could not understand. It must have been in that very moment she resolved upon that fearful deed.

“‘Oh, Verina, Verina,’ I said in a voice that was low and broken, ‘do not leave me; I do not wish to live.’ But she only said as though she heard me not:

“‘Adieu, dearest, beloved Rodolph—trust me—I will never be Count Otho’s wife.’

“‘You shall not leave me,’ I frantically cried.

“‘Let me go, dearest,’ she said firmly, but in the same low tone, so as to be heard only by me. ‘I can bear anything, except causing your death.’

“Mechanically I obeyed her. I could do nothing else. Waldenberg then approached her with his cruel smile.

“‘Having ridden so far with Count

Rodolph, my fair bride, you may now ride back with me.'

" 'Oh no!' shrieked Verina, breaking from his rude grasp. She would have flown back to me, but her father seized her, and in silence lifted her on a spare horse an attendant led.

" Otho turned to me.

" 'To-morrow is my wedding day,' he said. 'Pray honour me by being present. You see I bear no malice.'

" 'But I do,' I exclaimed, maddened by grief, and by his taunting voice.

" 'Furiously I sprang towards him, fiercely we grappled with one another. What could any man's strength avail against one strung with fury and grief as I. In a moment Otho von Waldenberg lay prostrate on the ground. I do not know what I should have done next, but I was seized in the grasp of many hands, and my father's voice exclaimed :

“ ‘Would you add murder to your crime, degenerate, base and dishonoured as you already are ?’

“I struggled with my captors ; but in vain. Otho sprang on his horse, bowed to me with a mocking, exulting laugh, and galloped after Count Starenheim and his daughter—my Verina—Otho’s bride !

“My brothers it was who, in obedience to my father’s command, had interfered between us. They now mounted their horses, so did my father. They rode off also, and I was alone. As the sound of horses’ hoofs died away, my excitement gradually faded into blank, dull, leaden despair. I sank down by poor Roland’s side, he was stiff and cold in death, but I could not pity him, I envied him. I stroked his arched and glossy neck, and then in utter exhaustion I laid my head against it. He could not hear my low bitter moans, but somehow it seemed to me that he, my

faithful friend, must feel for me and pity me, when even my father turned from my grief, in anger and disdain. The withered fallen leaves floated rustling over me into the foaming river, and then floated quietly on, midst its eddies and currents, down towards the sea. I shuddered as they touched me.

“ I can remember nothing more, till my awaking in my own room at Uznach, from what must have been a long and heavy swoon. I heard afterwards that on the morning following our flight, some peasants had found me, and recognising me, had brought me home to Uznach, wondering greatly to have found me lying there beside my dead horse. Poor people ! in their innocent kindness, they sent one of their number on before to prepare the Count for the sight of his eldest son borne home insensible. They feared the shock might be too great for him. How unnecessary such a precaution was, I will not say.

Had I known these facts at the time, it would perhaps have assisted me to clear myself from the cruel accusation so soon to be brought against me—an accusation from which all my life long I have never since been able to free myself, and which I could never forget—so fearful a shock was it at the time. Ah, why did not those kind peasants leave me there to die, with the wild Danube chanting my death-song, instead of bringing me back to life and misery? Was it not enough to lose my Verina, that even the remembrance of her sweet face was to be embittered to me?

“Even now, I cannot dwell with calmness on the hours that followed my awakening to the remembrance of our wild midnight ride, and the knowledge of my loss. I would speak to no one, I would see no one, and in silence and loneliness that day and the following wore away. I knew that to attempt to see

Verina again was vain, for the poor child would be but too carefully guarded ; nor did I believe it possible that she could adhere to her resolve never to marry Otho—my hated rival. But, as I have said, of this time I cannot bear to think. I will therefore pass rapidly on to the last day I ever spent at Uznach.

“ It was evening. I heard what sounded to be a party of horsemen approaching the Schloss. In my apathy I scarcely heeded this, and gave them no further thought till I was awakened from the first sleep which had visited me since my return from Heidelberg, by the forcible entrance of several men into my apartment. I sprang hastily up, full of anger, for I had forbidden any one to approach me ; but when I beheld who the intruders were, my resentment was lost in astonishment.

“ The men who crowded into my room wore the uniform of the police ! Was I

dreaming? I asked myself in a surprise, that for a time did me good by startling me out of my listless dejection.

“ ‘What on earth can you want here?’ I exclaimed. That I was their prisoner never for an instant occurred to me.

“ ‘Count Rodolph von Siegmaringen, I regret to be obliged to request you to come with us,’ said one of the men in some embarrassment. He hesitated a little and then added : ‘Count Rodolph, you are our prisoner.’

“ I stared at the man in utter astonishment. ‘What have I done? of what am I accused?’ I asked.

“ ‘I do not know, my lord,’ replied the man; ‘my duty is simply the apprehension of those accused of any crime; therefore of the accusations brought against you I am perfectly ignorant. In the course of justice you will soon learn. I trust you will surrender yourself quietly, and that you

will believe me that it is with regret I fulfil my duty to-day.'

"I believe he spoke truly. It was not often that he had arrested a young Count, as he slept quietly in his own room; and he evidently considered trial and imprisonment fitted only for those of lower rank.

"My thoughts flew hastily to my father, I knew how proud he was; how he cherished the idea that through all his long line of ancestors he need think of none with shame. What would he think of his son being arrested like a common felon? As sadly enough I thought thus, I raised my eyes and saw that in the shadow of the doorway stood my father himself. It was he who had brought the officers of justice to my room. They had received their prisoner from his father's hands, and there he stood, grown more proud and stern than ever now in his fancied dis-

grace. I could read his countenance but too plainly. There was no compassion for me in it, only a deep and bitter indignation and loathing.

"I sprang towards him: 'You must know of what I am accused—tell me, I entreat you,' I said.

"For an instant he turned from me with a look of bitter contempt; then, as I pressed him to answer me, he turned again towards me, and in a voice of keen, cold irony answered:

"'It is scarcely necessary for you to ask; your conscience, if you have one, can tell you all far better than I can.'

"At that moment I was too deeply pained by his injustice to resent the unmerited contempt with which he regarded me.

"'I am innocent of any crime,' I exclaimed. 'I can swear to you by all that is most holy, that I am perfectly

unable to conceive of what I can be accused.'

" 'I do not wish you to perjure yourself,' was my father's pitiless reply. 'This pretence of innocence is useless,' he continued; 'you neither deceive me by it, nor can you any one else. You act well, Rodolph, I allow; nothing can be more like injured innocence than your words and voice—but it will not do; and for the sake of the name you, alas, bear, do not attempt further deception; be honourable at least!'

"I was thoroughly indignant now. 'This is strange justice!' I cried; 'to refuse me the possibility of clearing myself, and to condemn me unheard! Thank Heaven, whether you believe me or not, I *know* that I am innocent of any crime.'

" 'Innocent!' repeated my father contemptuously; 'prove it to-morrow and I will believe you.' Then his cold sneering tone changed to one of suppressed but

fierce passion. 'Had you not already sufficiently disgraced me and your family? Oh that Starenheim had shot you as you deserved! How much rather would I see you dead than this hour of disgrace and infamy! Never before was our noble family so dishonoured, as that one of its members should be dragged as a criminal to answer for a crime so cruel and so base! Alas, that I should be the father of one so utterly degraded! Would that I were dead! would that you were dead! I disown you for my son—my bitterest curse and hatred shall rest upon you till you die!'

"It was fearful to witness the passion that flashed in the Count's eyes, and shook in his raised voice; even in my indignation I could feel for him.

"'I do not believe that you are innocent,' he pursued moodily; 'but even if you were, it would make little difference: you will have been accused and tried, and

that is in itself disgrace. Never before did even the suspicion of so base a crime sully the honour of a Siegmaringen.'

"I exclaimed bitterly, 'Then you discard me because I, alone, am unfortunate?'

"My father cast a look of withering contempt on me. 'No,' he replied, 'not because you are *unfortunate*, but because you are the *disgrace* and *shame* of your family.'

"He said this with the concentrated energy of an anger which was almost too deep for words. Then with a hasty step he strode down the passage and disappeared. I made no attempt to detain him; I saw all efforts to convince him were worse than useless: he was too deeply prejudiced against me.

"For a moment I stood motionless where he had left me. I was lost in painful thought, for I was deeply wounded by his injustice. The police officers recalled me to the present. I silently accompa-

nied them, quietly submitting to everything ; even when I heard the key turned in the door of my prison cell it did not rouse me. For a time I was thus much oppressed by the thought of what had just passed, and filled with an angry impatience to know of what I was accused. But gradually this new feeling gave place to the old dull pain. Again I thought only of Verina, and sinking back into my apathetic dejection, I was once more indifferent to all other things.

“ The following day I was summoned to the bar. I took my place there with little emotion, though I was startled to see that my brothers appeared among the witnesses against me ; and moved a little when I caught a glimpse of my father’s stern, pitiless countenance. I knew that he must be come here to prove to the world that he too sided against me ; that the Count von Siegmaringen would not sully his own

honour by upholding a degenerate son, for he vouchsafed me no word or look.

“ After various, to me, uninteresting, unheeded preliminaries, the judge began :

“ ‘ Count Rodolph von Siegmaringen, you are accused of a heavy crime, of one so treacherous and cruel that even to hear of it is painful and abhorrent.

“ ‘ On the eve of her marriage day, the young Countess Verina von Starenheim is found cruelly murdered, and you, a rejected aspirant to her hand, are accused of her death.’

“ For many a long year afterwards, those fearful words lay branded on my heart. Day and night they rang in my ears. I could never escape from their dread companionship. They fell upon me then with a dull, stony misery, which I cannot describe—I only comprehended that Verina was dead—not my own danger. Verina dead! I could not couple her bright

young face with death ; and the thought that she, the object so long of all my deep affections, all my student dreams, all my purest thoughts—my idolised Verina ! that she should be lying cold and pale in death ; that the one star of my Heaven would shine for me no more, made my brain reel with the blank despair of utter desolation. I could not speak, I could not move. Slowly, slowly the faces before me grew blank and misty ; I could hear the judge's monotonous voice proceeding calmly on, but I could distinguish no words : I felt as if I was turning into marble, so frozen with horror was the blood that curdled round my heart. Yet quietly I stood there, silent, immovable, and men only saw a strange, cold, fixed look pass over my face, as though death had swept past me, with his icy breath.

“Neither my father nor my brothers gave me one look of sympathy ; but in

that crowded court there was one youthful heart full to overflowing with generous love and faith, that of my student friend, Berthold's father. He gave but one glance at me now, and then impetuously dashed past every obstacle till he stood beside me, and in his loving sympathy threw his arms around me. *He* was not ashamed to stand by me when even my father forsook me.

"The touch of friendship roused me from that fearful trance. My head sank on Berthold's shoulder, and a bitter groan, heard only by him, escaped me.

"I believe it was Berthold who so earnestly represented that I was quite unfitted to attend to anything further, that the continuation of the trial was postponed to the following day, and I know that it was Berthold who bestirred himself to obtain for me legal advice and counsel. I was incapable of any exertion, and perfectly indif-

ferent to my fate. I cared for nothing now that Verina was dead : to have seen her Otho's wife would have been far more endurable.

“ It was not till many hours had passed that the horrible accusation, that it was I who had murdered her, recurred to me. As it did so, in my unendurable agony I flung myself down on the stone floor of my prison. *I* who loved her so ! *I* to have murdered her ! and my father could believe it !

“ The following day I was at least outwardly calmer, and the trial once more commenced. Circumstances were indeed against me. I had been absent from home on the very night of Verina's death, and it might well be supposed that, actuated by a frantic jealousy, I had murdered her, rather than that she should become the wife of another, and that other long the object of my unconcealed dislike.

“ ‘There was,’ said the Starenheims’ advocate, ‘no one else who could have the slightest motive for such a deed.’

“ They never thought of the sad truth—that Verina’s own hand, with unfaltering resolution, had struck the blow. I knew that it must have been so ; I understood now what her fixed look and strange words had meant, but even to Berthold I could not speak of her, this my conviction remained, therefore, foreign to the thoughts of all.

“ The advocate continued :

“ ‘These suspicions which would naturally arise, are irresistibly confirmed by the fact that the dagger found by the unfortunate lady, stained with her innocent blood, is proved to be Count Rodolph’s.’

“ I knew that this could not be so. I believed too that this assertion could not be proved. What was my surprise to hear the advocate proceed :

“ ‘ In the cause of justice, Count Hugo of Siegmaringen is prepared to do violence to his feelings and solemnly swear that he has frequently seen the weapon in the possession of his brother.’

“ ‘ Count Hugo, will you do this ?’ asked the judge.

“ I saw my brother turn pale, but he answered firmly, ‘ I will ;’ and he rose and solemnly swore that the dagger was mine. Then I fixed my eyes sternly upon him, and as he met them the thrill of fear and shame which passed over his face told me that he lied, and that he knew he lied. The judge turned to me. He bade that the dagger should be handed to me, to see whether I would own it for mine.

“ ‘ If Count Rodolph can swear that it never belonged to him, his brother’s testimony on this point will be disregarded,’ said the judge.

“ But I turned from it with horror. I

could not see it stained with Verina's life-blood ; I could not buy my life at such a price. Of course it was impossible to accept my oath that the weapon was not mine when I refused to look at it ; and I could see that all present regarded my expressions of horror as a subterfuge, and were from that moment convinced that I was guilty ; Berthold alone drew nearer to me, and smiled to me to show his faith.

"The trial proceeded, and I had the anguish of hearing Verina's name profaned by the lips of lawyers and strangers, and the story of our love and flight dragged forth for the amusement of the gaping crowd. When at last the advocate approached the subject of Verina's death, and described how they found her lying with her pale hands folded so calmly on her breast, it was more than I could endure.

“ ‘Why go on with this cruel mockery?’ I cried. ‘Condemn me if you will, I do not wish for a trial, I make no resistance, I make no defence—only spare me this torture.’

“And Berthold’s indignant voice was suddenly heard above all the buzzing clamour of the court, exclaiming :

“ ‘If you do not wish to drive Count Rodolph mad, do not speak of this.’

“The judge was irritated at Berthold’s interruption, he nevertheless requested that it should be regarded ; and, oh, how grateful I was to my faithful friend !

“Shortly after this the day’s proceedings closed. Sentence was to be delivered on the following day.

“That same evening, with more than usual emotion, Berthold entered my cell.

“ ‘You must escape to-night or never,’ he said in a low tone. ‘I have learnt that there is no chance of your acquittal.

To-morrow you will be condemned to death.'

"I was little moved. 'I do not wish to live,' I replied.

"'Oh, Rodolph! for my sake rouse yourself,' cried my friend. 'You *must* consent to my plans, I *will not* let you die—and such a death!'

"'But I do not wish to live,' I repeated moodily. I will not recount all the agitated arguments and entreaties with which poor Berthold replied. I was thoroughly sincere in my expressions of indifference to my fate, but his grief at last moved me to consent to escape, if I could. In one thing, however, I was immovable. That was in my refusal to allow Berthold to take my place in prison. I would not permit him to endanger himself in any way for me. I would escape with him or not at all.

"Except on this point I left all to him; though I was deeply grateful to him for

his unfaltering trust and friendship, I had no interest in his plans. To this day I scarcely knew how Berthold managed it, but that very night we were beyond the Bavarian frontier and far away from Uznach.

“All I distinctly remember of our flight is, that as Uznach was fading from our view, I paused for an instant and looked back upon it, taking my last farewell. The moonlight lay on turrets and towers whose every angle I knew so well, and beautiful, most beautiful looked the old stately Castle raising there its dark battlements above the sombre woods. Long and wistfully I gazed upon it, then I turned away, and never again shall I see my childhood's home.

“Years passed on, but no change came over my mood of listless despair. Verina's sudden death, coupled with the accusation that I was her murderer, had been too

great a shock for me quickly to recover from it. During these many years, I was cherished and protected in Berthold's family with a tenderness which I can never repay. They and only they listened trustingly to Berthold's faith in me and believed that I was innocent.

"At length I roused myself, I would no longer be a burthen to them. They entreated me not to leave them, but I knew that I must at last return to the world and fight my own way in life. It needed a sore struggle to rouse myself, but I succeeded.

"I came to the Rhineland. Here I could live unknown and unnoticed, and here I could support myself by my paintings, though I was but the wreck of my former self, and none could have recognised in me the gay Count Rodolph. I was beyond the reach of Bavarian law, but I rejected my name and rank with loathing ;

and was henceforth known only as the painter Maringen.

“Before many more years were passed, I heard that the Count von Siegmaringen was dead. Sternly and unforgivingly as he had lived, he died. He made no mention of me on his death-bed. He knew that I lived, but he evidently looked upon me as dead to him, for in his will he left Uznach and everything to ‘Hugo, his eldest son.’ Hugo had not perjured himself in vain.

“At length a ray of sunshine broke in upon me. A young English lady, with eyes that reminded me of my Verina, grew to look first with pity, then with love, on me and my sad, solitary life. Do not think I wronged your gentle mother by offering her the love I had not to give. I told her my story; it would have been dishonourable not to have done so. When I had finished, her eyes were full of tears,

but she did not shrink from me; she laid her hand in mine, saying softly: 'I will try and make you forget the past.'

"I gave her all the love I had to give, and for one brief year she was very happy. Then she died, and you and I, Verina, were alone in the world together.

"Berthold too was dead. Now that you have heard how much I owe him, you will not wonder that I should have always regarded his sons as my own; and that I once wished that you could have returned Berthold's affection, and have become his wife.

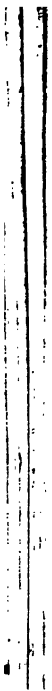
"My story is finished. My life also will soon be ended; but I can die in peace, now that you at least will know me to be innocent of that fearful crime.

"My strength is failing fast. Adieu, my child—may your life be happier than your father's."

"RODOLPH VON SIEGMARINGEN."

The letter had long been read, and deepest twilight filled the room, but still Count Rodolph's daughter sat beside the dying fire, musing deeply on the strange, sad revelation which that letter contained. It moved her much to learn how strange and mournful a life her father's had been; but to none did she intend to confide its history. She had no wish to hear her father criticised, perhaps condemned, and to find herself a Countess moved her little—it could not bring her back her husband's love—nor her lost Evelyn.

END OF VOL. II.



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